EDWARD LEAR IN MALTA
EMMANUEL FIORENTINO

Edward Lear is, without any shadow of doubt, one of the most colourful artistic personalities to have set foot on the shores of the Maltese Islands during the nineteenth century. Perhaps best known for his immortal 'Book of Nonsense' which has placed him firmly at the very top of that very English genre of literary expression, Lear made another huge success and of an equally lasting importance elsewhere. It is in fact through a reflection of a totally different facet of his genius that we remember him as a landscape artist who produced a vast amount of topographical drawings, watercolours and paintings. It is equally true that his literary output, consisting principally of an enormous number of limners, besides of course his travel journals as well as a ponderous mass of correspondence has continued to draw admirers to this day. John Ruskin, the leading voice of artistic criticism during Victorian England, promptly placed him at the summit of a list of the hundred best authors, adding 'I really don't know any author to whom I am half so grateful for my idle self as Edward Lear'.

The lure which the art of painting exercised upon both Ruskin and Lear individually must surely have further cemented that opinion. Ruskin was a great admirer of Joseph M.W. Turner, praising him to high heavens in his first volume of 'Modern Painters' which he published anonymously in 1843. Lear on his part must have traced his ambition to become a landscape artist to the driving force which had been occasioned through witnessing some works of that best loved of English painters. As a result Lear has joined artists like Turner himself, Constable, Bonington, de Wint and W.J. Muller who together provide a framework on which landscape in English art becomes an important point of reference.

Edward Lear was born on 12 May 1812 in Holloway in northern London, son of a stockbroker Jeremiah and of Ann Clerk Skerrett. Their marriage in 1788 had by then produced numerous offspring. Edward in fact was the twentieth child of the lot but many of the rest did not survive beyond their infancy. When he was about fourteen years old he was entrusted to his eldest sister Ann in order to ease the filial burden on his mother. Ann's task was however made all the more difficult since Edward enjoyed a very delicate health during his childhood, suffering from frequent bouts of asthma and bronchitis, while fits of epilepsy since he was seven complicated matters. Still he survived all these physical setbacks and by the time he was in his middle teens, he had already set his mind to make a career in drawing and painting. And circumstances were soon to help him push forward his ambition.

The Foundation of the Zoological Society of London in 1826, principally through the efforts of Sir Stamford Raffles and Sir Humphrey Davy together with the setting up of the Zoological Gardens in Regent's Park provided the right atmosphere for

1. February 1886 issue of the Pall Mall magazine.
2. A private income of £300 a year left to her by her grandmother helped to ease her responsibilities with the young Edward.
the demand of zoological literature, illustrated with species that answered to the requirements of the aims for which the Society was founded, namely "the introduction of new and curious subjects of the Animal Kingdom". Edward Lear immediately plunged into the action being offered by this novel manner of artistic adaptation. He partnered the naturalist Prideaux Selby for a time but between 1830 and 1832 he moved forward on his own, publishing in folio studies of the parrot family entitled 'Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae'. During the middle 30's of the century, Lear started his unquenchable thirst for travel that was to mark henceforth the whole course of his lifetime. He introduced this obsession by trips to Ireland and the Lake District but in 1837 he proceeded to Rome which for some time was to become the starting point for his travels around the Mediterranean. It is no wonder that he chose Rome as the focus for his artistic activity since a resurgence of that classicism for which that city was of primary significance was currently in the making back in his native England. However his was too much of a restless soul to tie his enthusiasm exclusively to Rome and so the following years are witness to his presence in several far-flung places, from Southern Italy to Albania, from Greece to Egypt, from Turkey to Palestine and India, Corsica to Ceylon and the Maltese to the Ionian Islands. The demon that lunged the spirit of a romantic in search of a newly-generated interest in landscape had readily taken hold of him, overpowering at the same time the drawback of his frail health which would have easily deterred a person of lesser determination from undertaking journeys with their fair share of hazards and accompanying fatigue. Instead his enthusiasm for travelling stayed well with him into his old age.

Lear therefore transformed his life to a search for the balm of fresh scenery, sometimes even sidestepping the normal itineraries to visit places as Albania which the English historian Edward Gibbon had described as 'the country within sight of Italy less known than the interior of America'. Lear had a ubiquitous sense for landscape which surfaced wherever the winds of fortune blew him and though he imposed a subtle melancholic tinge to his drawings, engravings and watercolours, he inevitably managed to elicit that indefinable feeling of a particular place, however undefinable in words it might be. This impression equally applied to his Maltese works some of which will be mentioned later.

An account of Lear's travels shows clearly that Malta and Corfu were the most frequently visited islands by him in the whole Mediterranean. The latter island was at the time capital of the Ionian Republic under British suzerainty which had been created in 1814 following the defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Leipzig. He spent long sojourns there, deeply enchanted by the place which in many ways became his favourite spot on earth. He lived there between 1855 and 1858 and then again between 1861 and 1864, the year in which the Ionian islands were ceded back to Greece. Lear's visual recordings of the Greek landscape which as expressions of its more idyllic moments are viewed in some of the beauty spots of Corfu and its sister islands, were published in 1863 as 'Views of the Seven Ionian Islands'. When three years later he was on one of his last visits to Malta, he did not mince words when he complained in a letter that 'no creature has as yet asked for even a £5 drawing, nor have I sold even one of my few remaining Corfu books'. That letter dated 13 February 1866 was addressed to Lady Waldegrave who had a few years before married the Irishman Chichester Fortescue, a long-standing friend of his possessing a charming personality and whose appreciative attitude of Lear's works was by itself instrumental in maintaining a lifelong correspondence with the artist. In 1874 Fortescue was created Lord Carlingford after having filled with success several public offices besides being elected to Parliament for the Liberal Party. This kind of association with public figures of the calibre of Lord Carlingford was to enhance immeasurably Lear's prospects for commissions which he was to enjoy occasionally.

Friendship in fact was not an elusive phenomenon in Lear's life. His outgoing attitude endeared him to people, forging at times permanent relationships as in the case of Fortescue. When the artist met in Malta Franklin Lushington whose brother Henry with whom Lear was staying was then secretary to the Governor, an even greater affection was instilled for this new acquaintance. Soon after they left together to explore parts of Greece and even though Lear had to complete his journey to southern Albania on his own, the elation which he was still feeling for having met such a sympathetic companion as Lushington conditioned those universal traits of beauty for which he was highly sensitive. This is exemplified by the manner with which he endows his description of the Albanian landscape: 'You have the simple and exquisite mountain-forms of Greece, so perfect in outline and proportion - the lake, the river and the whole plain... you have the charm of architecture, the picturesque mosque, the minaret, the fort and the sea... you have what is found neither in Greece nor in Italy, a profusion everywhere of the most magnificent foliage reclaiming the greenness of our own island... majestic cliff-shores; castle-crowned heights and gloomy fortresses; palaces glittering with gilding and paint; mountain-passes such as you encounter in the snowy regions of Switzerland', all this together with 'a crowded variety of costume and pictorial incident'.

One may also add here that when Lear published 'The Journal of a
Landscape painter in Corsica in 1870 he dedicated it specifically to Lushingdon and it was to Lushington himself that he left his personal diaries and other manuscripts which eventually came up for sale in London in 1929.

The foregoing rapid survey of Lear's personality, the extent of his travels and acquaintances should set the stage for Lear's connection with Malta. His first visit to the Maltese Islands was in 1848 while he was journeying from Italy to Greece[11] to be followed by at least five other visits, the last being in 1866. The islands offered their own intrinsic fascination though one must admit that this fell short of the extent to which he was won over by the Ionian island of Corfu which he loved and which was set conveniently on the threshold of the Greek stage which, with its clarity of light and the conditioning of its classical heritage, was a natural magnet for a pair of English eyes brought up in the less defined atmospheric effects of a northern climate[12]. Still he felt captured by certain undefinable qualities in the local scenery, even opting to describe it by applying his knack at coming words which seem nonsensical at first glance but are in fact replete with sounds that seem to echo the first utterings of human language. The landscape in Corfu for example impresses him as being 'pomskizzilious and gromphiberous, being as no words can describe its magnificence'.[13] Incidentally such use of words, pointing to a secondary but still important aspect of Lear's genius, obviously goes beyond the mere world of appearances, so that if one should analyse carefully the mechanism, alliterative or otherwise, by which they effect one's ears, one would obtain a better idea both of the feeling they are meant to convey and of Lear's metaphysical view of reality.

The more obviously rocky texture of Malta when compared to its sister island needed no such linguistic elaboration when in one of his many letters addressed to Lady Waldegrave[14] he expressed his deep-felt disappointment at the miserable way in which local patronage reacted to his art: 'My whole winter gains — twenty pounds — must remain a melancholimnic reminiscence of the rocky island and its swell companying'. Writing to a friend called Drummond about the same time he pointed out that while many of the English military and naval personnel then posted in Malta had called on him and though being full of praise for his drawings, none were impressed by them. His actual words bring out all the cynicism expected of one deeply hurt by the hypocrisy to which he felt a victim: 'Of Admirals and Generals, Captains, Colonels, Majors military and nautical with the wives and daughters thereof — no less than 83 of all sorts have been to see my "beautiful drawings" and not a single creature has asked for one'. He inevitably felt that the island had let him down: 'I am perfectly ashamed of all Malta*, and while shedding off this usual gentle manners around him, we would probably be nearer the truth were we to identify an element of the tragi-comic about these reproofs.

During Lear's last visit to Malta, spanning from December 1865 to March 1866 he worked in a house at 9 Strada Torri, Sliema. That town one must remember was at the time still in its embryonic stage of development, consisting mainly of a stretch of fields sprinkled with some country houses. Lear therefore felt himself cut off from the social life which he loved so much and which could only be found on the other side of Marsammett harbour in Valletta. Apart from a trip by boat across the harbour to the capital which was definitely not to his liking,[15] the alternative journey entailed a good three miles of mostly primitive country road. Lear adds that practically his only companion at the time in that house was 'my good servant George' without whom 'I don't know how I could have got on'. This George, one may point out, was born as Giorgio Cocali in Corfu of Albanian stock.[16] He took up service with Lear in 1856 during one of the latter's visits to the Ionian island, keeping up his devoted companionship through future travels till he died twenty seven years later.[17]

Barring certain censures Lear liked Malta — he always looked forward to go ashore on the island to see 'that much beloved place' which provided him with a myriad of instances to watch life go by. Drawing on the Barcana Point, exploring the streets of Valletta and Senglea or watching the fleet of small boats plying back and forth across the Grand Harbour at the magical hour of sunset when the last remnants of shadows are being stretched to their limit both on land and on water before the setting in of darkness, were all some of the most enduring moments which Lear the romantic savoured during his sojourns on the island. He became equally captured by the general air of feverish activity that characterised Maltese life not simply through the dedicated industry of the local populace in general, but also, as he so sarcastically remarks, by the 'constant ringing of bells' which to his amazement, but not to the priests', should be any sort of pleasure to the Deity*.

It does not follow that for Lear Malta was simply an ant-hill of humans shuffling along their individual paths of labour or religious callings. The local scenery has its

11. Edward Lear's name appears in the passenger list of the ship 'Osiris' which left Malta on 30th December 1848 en route to Alexandria and Beyrouth (modern day Beirut) — P.A.V. Register of Arrivals and Departures Vol.46 fol.1037. I am indebted to Mr. A. Espina Reducer for this information. The reference must however be tied to Lear's second visit to Malta in December 1848 since his first visit was in April of the same year.

12. Another of his remarks about Corfu sums up his deep feelings about the place of which 'I am now cut off, though I cannot write the name without a pang.'

13. The invention of words occurs both in many of his limericks e.g. 'that ombliferous person of Crete' as well as in many letters e.g. his complaint while at San Remo that 'the ground is all bescaitered with horrid Germen, Gerwomen and Gerchildren'.

14. The letter belongs to 1866, the year of his last visit to Malta which was apparently greatly precipitated by the lack of a generously appreciative audience to his work on the island.

15. The poem which begins and ends with the line 'How pleasant to know Mr. Lear!' is among his most delightful and popular.

16. notwithstanding his travels, Lear feared the sea; he expressed his 'terror and disgust when crossing the channel' (i.e. the English Channel). Even his drawings hardly ever depict a sea which is not dead calm.

17. his family came from the fortress of Suli, made famous in Byron's 'Childe Harold'. Lear praised him elsewhere for his 'quiet, content and unumbering patience, and his constant attention to me, his wrong doing master'.

18. Giorgio's death on 8th August 1883 at Monte Generoso was a hard blow to Lear's last years. Their companionship after death however continued for a memorial stone to Giorgio lies side by side with Lear's grave in San Remo.
own idyll to relate and Lear keenly listened to it before he translated it reverentially into his inimitable drawings and watercolours. There are several testimonies of them both in Malta and abroad. But apart from any work which exists in private hands, the only selection of his work that relates to his legacy to the Maltese Islands which is available for public viewing is the set of watercolours at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta. Together with the odd watercolour dated 14 May 1847 showing Calatafimi, that town in western Sicily which was some time later destined to play a vital role in Garibaldi’s dream of a united Italy, this collection of seven Learian views of Malta and Gozo is now on permanent display in a small room in the company of other nineteenth century topographers of the Maltese Islands like Bellanti, Brocktorff and Schranz. The following is a list of the Museum watercolours together with some of the jotted down notes to help him finish the particular work back in his studio:

(i) Rabat, Gozo 1866 (20 March) white stones
(ii) Calatafimi 1847 (14 May)
(iii) View from Città Vecchia (5p.m. April 3, 1866) you may insert lots of Monx – red clover – deep blue in shade – bright pink of all (?)
(iv) San Anton (5p.m. 7 January 1866)
(v) Rabat, Gozo after sunset 6.30p.m. March 19, 1868
(vi) San Anton (5p.m. 7 January 1866)
(vii) View from Città Vecchia (5p.m. April 3, 1866) you may insert lots of Monx – red clover – deep blue in shade – bright pink of all (?)
(viii) Fungus Rock (17 March 1866)
(ix) Xlendi, Gozo, white single 11.30a.m. March 1866
(x) St. Julian’s Bay 5.16p.m. 29 Dec. 1865

The Museum watercolours lend us a good example of Lear’s style and method of working. As to the first, the economy of line which is however regulated by a deliberate attention to topographical details becomes fortified by the second where as has already been observed each subject is sprinkled with self-guiding comments. Apart from their considerable artistic merits, they of course each provide a dated document on what has practically remained unchanged or on what has succumbed to the passage of time. The public fountain on the way to Xlendi for example still survives as it happens in (i), the same goes for the tiny San Anton watercolour which is still an oasis of greenery, but today’s skyline of St. Julian’s is visibly different from what it was in 1865, while in (ii) the rotunda at Moqa that had been completed only a few years before is seen as the centre-piece of what was still at the time a small village.

Since Lear visualised very sensitively the world around him as a fleeting succession of moments, he therefore recorded occasionally the exact time, or an approximation of it, at which he must have sensed in each particular case that the essence of light was painterly captured. Thus while both the View from Città Vecchia and San Anton are both clocked at 5p.m. which seems to be a rough timing, this being equally applicable to the ‘after sunset 6.30p.m.’ of the view of Rabat, Gozo and the 11.30a.m. in that of Xlendi, Gozo, the 5.16p.m. which is scribbled on the St. Julian’s Bay watercolour attests to a far more exact concern with the way light is a direct function of a frozen instant. No...
Maltese Rural Scene with Mosta Dome in the Distance. Watercoloured ink-drawing by Edward Lear, initialed and dated March 31/31. Private Collection. Photo: Alfred Cauchi