

MY HOMELAND IN THE EYES OF BRITISH VISITORS

I will not be writing about the Rectors' Meeting held in Malta last February. I leave that to more distinguished authors in Rome, Salamanca, Valladolid, Louvain and the British Isles. Instead, I thought it would be interesting to read about the impressions of some prominent travellers who happened to set foot on the Island of Malta.

An epitome of Europe... and one of the best academies for politeness

I was impressed by what a Scottish traveller, Patrick Brydone, had to say about Malta towards the end of the eighteenth century. He landed at Valletta harbour in 1770. Malta was then governed by the Knights of the Order of St John. The Jesuits had just been expelled from the Island, in line with the policy taken by other European sovereigns. Brydone writes:

“On getting to land we found ourselves in a new world indeed - the streets crowded with well-dressed people, who have all the appearance of health and affluence... As Malta is an epitome of Europe, and an assemblage of the younger brothers, which are commonly the best of its first families, it is certainly one of the best academies for politeness in this part of the globe.”

It should be recalled that the Knights of St John (who were subdivided into eight langues, i.e. national groupings, among them Portugal, Castille, Aragon, France) came from the noble

families of Europe. Some of their positive qualities were passed on 'by osmosis' to the local inhabitants with whom they occasionally mixed.

A City built by gentlemen for gentlemen

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), the Scottish novelist, poet, historian and biographer, set out on a continental tour in 1831 after his health had deteriorated rapidly. He hoped that the mild Mediterranean weather would be of help. He had a long stay at Naples, and even visited Malta in late 1831 with his son and daughter. The author of *Ivanhoe* and *Rob Roy* described Valletta as "the city built by gentlemen for gentlemen", and also refers to it as "the splendid town quite like a dream". The reason behind these complimentary statements can be explained by the fact that Valletta (whose foundation stone was laid in 1566) is rich in Renaissance and Baroque paintings, sculpture and architecture.

Devotions as it were on parade

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863), the English novelist renowned for his work *Vanity Fair*, popular among Victorian novel readers, visited Malta in 1844. He describes the Co-Cathedral of St John the Baptist (formerly the Conventual church of the Knights of St John) as "a noble hall covered with a rich embroidery of gilded carving... It seemed to me a fitting place for this wealthy body of aristocratic soldiers, who made their devotions as it were on parade, and though on their knees, never forgot their epaulets or their quarters of nobility".

A delightful station

Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), a British statesman and novelist and prime minister (in 1868 and between 1874 and 1880) visited Malta in 1830. During a 16-month-long tour, he followed the so-called "Byronic path" which led him to visit Spain, Italy, other Mediterranean nations and the Near East. Disraeli, the favourite prime minister of Queen Victoria, lavishly praised Valletta and Malta:

"Arrived in Malta, a place from which I expected little, and have found much. Valletta surprises me as one of the most beautiful cities I have ever visited... I walked down the Strada Reale, which is nearly as good as Regent Street... Malta is certainly a delightful station. Its city, Valletta, equals in its noble architecture, if it does not excel, any capital in Europe."

A very industrious race

The future Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) visited Malta in 1832-33. He had been invited by Archdeacon Froude to accompany him and his father on a winter trip to the Mediterranean. After an unfortunate experience at sea on board the *Hermes* in December 1832 and after having been sea-sick, he was glad to write: "And now (December 24) we are safe at Malta, and hope, please God, to have a quiet night before Christmas Day." In a letter to his sister Harriet, Newman describes his first glimpse of the Maltese archipelago: "One of the first sights we came to in Malta was St Paul's Bay, where tradition goes that the Apostle was wrecked. Above St Paul's Bay is Città Vecchia, where probably was the Roman garrison spoken of, Acts xxviii... The bells are beautiful here, as at Gibraltar and Cadiz, deep and sonorous, and they have been going all the morning, to me very painfully" (December 25, 1832). In fact, in Newman. *The Pillar of the Cloud*, Meriol Trevor states that "all

the bells pealing in the [Maltese] churches only made Newman feel more sad". (p. 115)

The *Hermes* later continued its journey to Patras, Zante and Corfu (Greece). Back in Malta in the second week of January 1833, Newman had to abide by the strict quarantine regulations enforced by the British administration of the Island. In the numerous letters Newman wrote from Malta, he describes in great detail his quarters in the Lazzaretto, his meeting with the Chief Justice, Sir John Stodart, the situation of the Catholic Church in the islands, the dispute as to who had the right to appoint the local bishop, and the position of the clergy vis-à-vis the legal system. In the same letter to his sister Jemima (January 15, 1833), Newman avers that "the Maltese are a very industrious race - a contrast to the Ionians... Malta increases by a thousand souls a year. It has the largest population on the smallest territory of any place in the world - above 100,000." In another letter, written to his mother eleven days later, Newman again describes the Maltese as a very industrious race (January 26).

In the same letter to his mother, he describes his awe when he visited the Co-Cathedral of St John, and affirms:

"I have seen St John's Church and most magnificent it is. It is in the same style as St Peter's; in richness and exactness, minuteness and completeness of decoration, far exceeding anything I have ever seen. I shall go to it once or twice more, to get some more accurate notion of it... It is covered throughout with the most costly marbles and with gilding; a multitude of pictures - some very fine - some statuary, splendid tapestries, and silver lamps and candlesticks of course. In the Chapel of the Communion are the famous silver rails which were saved from the clutches of Bonaparte by being painted to look like wood."

A curious note written by Newman on January 28 leaves the reader wondering what had actually happened to him: "Last

night, as I put on my blister, I reflected it was just a week since I caught my cold at the Lazaret by speaking to a ghost". (!) Meriol Trevor states that "from this episode, he thought, came the cold ... and gave him the worst cough he had ever had in his life - caught 'speaking to a ghost'." (p. 116) Newman eventually left Malta on February 7, 1833 aboard the Francisco, a Glasgow-built steamer, with a small crowd of foreign nobility on board.

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