

Book review: Maltese self-governance through a historical lens


Dominic Fenech draws on his long experience of lecturing and researching


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1921: Self-government in Malta 1921-1933

by Dominic Fenech

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What is there still to know about Malta's first self-government? The British government in Malta was authoritative, driven exclusively by imperial defence needs; the Maltese politicians had to work against all odds for political recognition and the growth of democracy. Self-government, when it came in 1921, was the first hallmark of progress in a long constitutional struggle. The British must bear the brunt of imperial guilt for taking so long to grant it and then revoking it so quickly; the Maltese should revel in the pride of their gains despite their falls.

This is an arguable point of view, a good piece of old-school historiography, the story that is all too often paraded and even inflated through certain artistic productions (take the 2021 film *Blood on the Crown*) or in political speeches on commemorative days. Neat and convincing though it may sound, this is only a rigid dualistic interpretation.

Those who read Professor Dominic Fenech's *1921: Self-government in Malta 1921-1933* will learn that there is so much more to it than this. Not that this book sets out to vindicate any side. Rather, what distinguishes this work is the refusal of thinking in monoliths.

Fenech draws on his long experience of lecturing and researching the local and global inter-war period to assess, with great clarity and dexterity, and in a characteristically commanding style, the paradoxes, the multiform meanings, and the variegated relevance of the short-lived experience of Malta's first self-government.

In this sense, this is the best single-volume guide to, not only how, but more importantly why, the 1921 constitution was gained, suspended, regained and definitely lost: an oscillation which captured the volatile reality of fortress colony Malta caught in the throes of continuity and change.



Members of the Senate and the Legislative Assembly, along Strada Teatro, heading towards the Palace, on November 1, 1921. Photo: John Cremona Collection

The period 1921-1933 is a case study of imperial aberration, which is the book's first key theme. A fortress colony by its very function cannot be self-governing. But Malta was. And the British chose that it should be. Malta was an atypical colony and the 1921 experience further confirms this. Here lies a fundamental contribution to imperial historiography.

Fenech's dissection of this anomaly strongly corroborates the theory, popular in the field of global and imperial history, that there was never a rigid imperial project in the sense of an ideological master plan

for Britain's empire. British imperial policy was usually incoherent, largely inconsistent, often unstable and to varying degrees, improvised. London called the shots and set the rules of the game, but its actions and reactions, and their timing, were also conditioned by what was endemic to the edges of empire.

“ The period 1921-1933 is a case study of imperial aberration ”

What certainly was endemic to Malta was the type of democracy that took root, the second key theme of the book. Democratic progress was not a standard by-product of constitutionalism, not least of self-government. In an admirably detached and scholarly tone, Fenech explores two anomalies linked to this point.

First, the British injected doses of democracy not for its own sake but for ulterior motives. Second, most of the Maltese politicians demanded power and responsibility in relative isolation from democracy. They fought for self-rule, yes, but they lobbied for a very conservative and semi-representative Senate, for example. Democracy was only just coming of age in inter-war Malta, which was otherwise still shrouded in socio-political conservatism.

This conservatism is particularly loud in the silence of women. Where women feature in the photos of this publication, they are notably few, and conspicuous mainly by what concealed them: the *ghonnella*. The 'absent presence' of women enunciates the lack of female political agency at that time.

Women did feature in the 1921 Letters Patent, Fenech reminds us, but only as supporting actors for their husbands: a man could be eligible for the vote through his wife's property. English suffragette Eva Hubback had protested the failed opportunity to enfranchise Maltese women in 1921. The Maltese had not asked for it, curtly rebutted Winston Churchill from the Colonial Office.

That Maltese women were publicly silent on the matter in the 1920s should not come as a surprise. It was only in 1919 that the University enrolled its first female students, only two of them. Therefore, on the eve of self-government, Malta still lacked a female intelligentsia that could have established a movement for change.

The constitution was derailed by 1933 and aborted by the colonial powers-that-be, as the conflation of global and local factors weighed down on the Anglo-Maltese-Italian triangle, in turn making of this self-government experience “a curve of optimism, disillusion and collapse” (Fenech).

The Maltese did not get it right the first time, because they were not entirely free to do so anyway. The experience, however, was not lost, contributing to a “genealogy of democracy” (M.A. Falzon) from which independent Malta would ultimately draw. As to whether we have got it right since then, and whether we are still getting it right now, that would make for a good postscript, and an apt point of reflection just after an election.



Partit tal-Haddiema meeting in Żejtun held on September 25, 1921, addressed by Mgr. Michael Gonzi, who would be elected Labour senator until his resignation to become bishop of Gozo in 1924. Photo: Richard Ellis Archive