BRITAIN AND MALTA 1787 - 1798

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The normal school history text-book does not concern itself with abortive diplomatic negotiations. Nor should it, for to cover minor moves and counter-moves in the extremely complicated world of diplomacy would obscure the main theme of the text-book and thus defeat the purpose for which it was produced — that of presenting the history of a period or of a country clearly and concisely. Nonetheless the student of history must be reminded constantly that what he reads and often what he is taught is a very simplified — sometimes grossly oversimplified and hence distorted — account or analysis of a particular series of events.

At times abortive negotiations can throw interesting and useful light on more important developments and this is so in the case of the unsuccessful negotiations between the Order of St. John and Great Britain during the last decade of the eighteenth century. The negotiations illustrate on the one hand the Order's struggle for survival in the hostile environment created by french revolution and the wars that followed, and on the other Britain's first unsteady steps towards the evolution of her Mediterranean policy — central to a proper understanding of British foreign policy down to the Suez crisis of 1956. More important the negotiations highlight Malta's strategic importance, both positive and negative, to great powers vieing for control over the Mediterranean. The negotiations failed; in 1797 the Order reached an understanding with Paul I of Russia and a year later Napolean expelled the knights from Malta. After 1798, Britain's policy in the Mediterranean was dominated by a determination not to repeat her earlier mistake; it was essential to occupy or at least to neutralise the tiny, but strategically invaluable Maltese Islands. It is arguable that had Britain come to an agreement with the Order, the knights' will to resist the the french would have been much stronger and the capture of Malta that much more difficult, Napolean might even have refused to risk assaulting the strongest fortifications in Europe.

The earlier inability of the british government to appreciate the vital necessity of acquiring a secure base at Malta, for a while proved disasterous to Britain's position in the Mediterranean. Her fleet and troops had to evacuate the area in 1796 for a time, for want of adequate supplies and maintenance facilities. She was unable to prevent the french from moving a large army by the sea to Egypt. France had successfully challenged Britain's supremacy at sea and ministers quaked at the thought of India falling to french arms. The government's policy in the Mediterranean since Britain joined the war against France in 1792 was manifestly a complete and utter failure.

The balance was to some extent quickly restored through Nelson's brilliant victory at Aboukir Bay—the Battle of the Nile; Britain's morale and prestige rose — the immediate danger

was over. But Britain's supremcy in the Mediterranean was not fully established until Malta was unquestionably under her sole control and this was not absolutely certain until 1814. The failure of Pitt"s government to come to terms with the Order of St. John cost Britain dearly — it also cost the Order the principality of Malta.

De Rohan, the Grand Master of the Order, made the first of a series of moves between Malta and Britain. In 1789 he heard that the british government intended to appoint a resident agent in Malta, subordinate to the british consul-general in Sicily. The matter was not terribly important, but De Rohan, like his predecessors, objected to any suggestion, however trivial, that Malta was in any way part of, or dependent on, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Moreover, he had two years earlier, as was normal practice in Malta appointed one William England to the post of british consul in Malta. Accordingly, on 20th May 1789, De Rohan wrote to the british foreign secretary explaining that an agent dependent on the consul-general in Sicily was incompatible with the independent status of the neutral principality of Malta. He suggested that the foreign secretary should confirm the appointment of William England. The foreign secratary, on 16th October the same year, wrote accepting De Rohan's proposal and thus William England became the first (and the last) british consul in Malta to hold the King's commission, as well as the Grand Master's patent, for his office.

In practice William England did not obtain his commission until 1794 and this long delay has been regarded as evidence of Britain's total lack of interest in Malta.[1] But in fact, the delay was caused by William England's unsuccessful efforts to collect the commission without paying the normal fee. The consul does not appear to have been a man of any great ability and the british government never trusted him with any important matter. He was obviously a creature of De Rohan for the Grand Master also made him consul for Sweden and the Baltic states in 1787, created him a Donat of the Order with a pension of 100 gold *scudi* and in 1787 granted him the reversion of the post of *cancelliere delle milizie* (which was worth 2,000 *scudi* a year) and in 1796 made him the first consul for the United States in Malta. The foreign secretary was wise to ignore him.

The effects of the french revolution on the Order's fortunes are well known. On September 19th, 1792, the property of the knights in France was confiscated. The next day, french forces under Kellermann and Dumouriez forced the prussian army, reputedly the finest in Europe, to retreat at the cannonade of Valmy. The following day, 21st Sept. 1792, Louis XVI was deposed; France became a republic. Within a few weeks french arms succeeded when Louis XIV had failed: Nice, Savoy, most of the left bank of the Rhine and the Austrian Netherlands were occupied. Naturally the Order's property in these areas was confiscated. Then, on 19th November, the republic proclaimed that France would assist all people to gain freedom and thus declared war on the monarchies and aristocracy of Europe.

It is in this context of violent change and of fear of the new force unleashed in Europe that we must view an appeal for british protection

1. Cf. Cavaliero, R.E., *The Last of the Crusaders,* (London, 1960), p.206.

sent from Malta by William England in December 1792. Presumably the consul would not have made such a request on his own initiative and without reference to his patron the Grand Master. The original document is lost but William England wrote again in January 1793 referring to an earlier letter "in which I petitioned your Lordship's interference with His Majesty towards granting this Island His Majesty's protection." This request for protection was possibly the reaction of a Grand Master panic-stricken by the news of disaster after disaster to the Orders's finances in Europe. With Britain's entry into the war against France in February 1793, De Rohan was anxious to show that an understanding with the the Order could be of some value to Britain. There was at this point no british squadron in the Mediterranean and french privateers played havoc with british shipping. William England informed the foreign secretary that the Order's fleet would patrol the sea between Malta and Sicily to protect vessels flying the british flag.

Neither the british government nor the Order seem to have been in any hurry to take matters any further. Indeed, during the spring and early summer of 1793 the european situation changed radically. France was crippled by civil war and economic chaos. The allies forced the french to retreat from many of the territories occupied in 1792 and threatened to invade France. The republic seemed doomed and the restoration of the monarchy by the end of the year was a distinct possibility. The restitution of the Order's property would doubtless follow and in this situation it was not necesary for the Order to seek protection from Britain nor indeed for Britain to involve itself with the Order.

The british government's attitude to the flagging fortunes of the Order, to the situation in the Mediterranean and possibly to the Order's request for protection, is perhaps to be found in an unsigned and undated foreign office memorandum on Malta written very shortly before 1st February 1793 when Britain declared war on France:

> "The following Report is respectfully submitted for the consideration of Lord Grenville:
> The *confiscation which has taken place in France of the property of the knights of Malta* will, it is believed, lay that Order under necessity of negotiating with one or other of the great maritime powers for protection.
> This protection will imply on the part of the Order the sovereignty of the Island and disposal of its land and sea forces. (There belong to Malta three or four line of battle ships, four galleys; of which one has a crew of 700 and the others 500; many xebecs, galliots, corsairs; in all carrying 200 men; a regiment of infantry of about 1,500 men besides about 2,000 destined for military service on ship board.
> Malta exclusive of Gozo can raise a militia of about 25,000 men. The impregnable strenght of Valletta is well known, it contains an arsenal with arms for 35,000 men.) *Should the french be the contrary party,* that Island will give them nearly the same command of the trade to the gulf of Venice, the Archipelago, Constantinople, Egypt and other parts of the Levant as the danes have of the Baltic trade by being in possession of Elsinore.
> Should the russians gain possession of it, they will have in their power

to starve Constantinople, reduce the greek islands and similar to the french to dictate the terms of intercourse to the Levant.
To Spain the fate of Malta is more an object of indifference, as the trade of Spain in the Mediterranean is chiefly coasting or at the farthest to the western coasts of Italy and Sicily.
To Great Britain the possession of Malta would secure in time of peace every advantage of commercial intercourse with Italy, the eastern half of the Mediterranean, Egypt and the coasts of Africa. It would be a great warehouse for the commodities of England and by means of its Lazarettos would enable the merchants to carry on without loss of time the Turkey trade.
In time of war it would give the most effectual protection to our trading vessels and if attacked, it would occasion such a diversion of the forces of our enemies as would necessarily weaken their efforts where we are most vulnerable.
As to the jealousy which might be excited against whatever power might make this acquisition, there is reason to think that France would sooner submit to see it in the possession of Great Britain than of Russia, and that Russia would give us the same sort of preference over France. Nor is there occasion to doubt of Spain and the Italian states entertaining similar sentiments.
The present is apprehended to be the proper time for such a negotiation, which from its importance, will require dexterous management. There are in London persons from their connections and rank in life equal to the business and who may be prevailed on to engage in it."[1]

The report analysed, quite accurately, the stategic and commercial value of Malta to the various maritime powers. However, the overall impression it gave was that Malta was only worth having to prevent another power from acquiring it. To Britain, Malta's positive value during war was limited to the protection of shipping and to sapping the resources of the enemy if he tried to capture it. This view was held by at least one of Pitt's ministers. Later in the 1790s Dundas, minister of war, said that he had been aware of the importance of Malta since 1792 — about the time this memorandum was written — but he felt that the Island was too far to the east to be of any practical use to the british navy during its operations off the south coast of France.[2] Indeed, until 1798, british policy in the Mediterranean was to acquire a base as close as possible to Toulon; at Corsica or Minorca.

Then, contrary to all expectation, the republic made a remarkable recovery during the summer of 1793. Under the leadership of Robespierre and and Carnôt, draconian measures restored the authority of the central government over most of France and the allies were forced to retreat from french soil. By the end of the summer

1. Printed with minor errors in Ryan, F.W., *The House of The Temple,* (London, 1930), pp.225/226. Cavaliero, *op.cit.*, pp.207/208 erroneously ascribes the report to William England. The phrases in italics provide the *terminus ante quam* and the *terminus post quam* for dating the document to between September 1792 and January 1793.
2. See below p. 16.

the new armies raised by the *levee en masse* were ready to take the offensive. It was in this situation that contacts between Britain and Malta were resumed.

The Order was desperately short of money and deep in debt. Already crippled by the loss of its property in France and elsewhere, its revenues continued to shrink as other states imposed taxes on the Order's estates to finance their own war efforts. The unfortunate De Rohan was in a dilemma; on the one hand the Order was obliged by its statutes to remain strictly neutral during wars beween european countries — a principle often strained in the past but never violated — on the other, all his instincts of self-defence, of self-preservation, of revenge and his total repugnance of the republic urged him to strike against the state that had dealt such terrible blows to his Order.

De Rohan's french secretary, Doublet, had already urged him to preserve a strict neutrality in spite of all provocation lest France or any other maritime power have any excuse for attacking Malta. [1] Even the Chevalier de Maisonneuve, one of the Order's most able diplomat and a confidant of De Rohan, could see a case for neutrality, though he did try to negotiate a treaty with Britain, and later supported the connection with Russia. [2] "If one has to reproach Grand Master De Rohan", he wrote in 1799, "it is for not putting forces into the field; for not inviting Britain and Russia to send a garrison to Malta; for having waited silent and inactive while the financial situation deteriorated from day to day. But as the state was weak and stripped of all its revenues perhaps this policy was the only safe course open to him." [3]

De Rohan, it seems, decided to give total co-operation to whichever government offered adequate protection and (above all) financial assistance, even if the price was the end of the Order's neutrality. Around September 1793, only Britain could have any interest in negotiating with the Order rather than seeking its destruction or being indifferent to its fate. In fact, Britain's need for men and munitions in the Mediterranean — for the fleet, for Toulon, for Corsica — gave De Rohan the only cards of any strength in an otherwise very weak hand. He could offer Britain troops, seamen, munitions, stores, limited naval support, and (though its value was as yet under-estimated in London) a strong strategic fortress with superb harbours.

On 1st November 1793 Lord Robert Fitzgerald, the british ambassador to Switzerland, wrote to the foreign secretary, Lord Grenville, enclosing "... the original letter and memorial which I have lately received from the Commander Maisonneuve, Minister Plenipotentiary from the Sovereign Military Order of Malta to Poland, ... and as they contain certain very inte-

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1. See Doublet, P., *Memoires de Malte*, (Paris, 1883), p.343. Doublet stressed to De Rohan that the Order had preserved its neutrality even during the Reformation and wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the Order lost much property in many countries.
2. Ryan, *op.cit.*, pp.215/216.
3. [de Maisonneuve], *Annales Historiques de l'Ordre Souverain de St. Jean de Jerusalem depuis l'Annee* 1725, (St. Petersburg, 1799), pp.32/33.

resting points I beg leave to recommend them to your Lordship's perusal ..."

The letter and memoir written by de Maisonneuve to Fitzgerald survive and make interesting reading. The Order's much vaunted neutrality, he wrote, was a thing of the past as the Grand Master had decided to pursue a policy of open hostility to the french republic. The french royalist government in exile was recognised in Malta as the true government of France. French vessels in Malta had been disarmed and were not allowed to fly the tricolour. De Maisonneuve claimed that he had instructions from De Rohan authorising him to conduct all the necessary negotiations preliminary to a formal treaty between the Order and Britain by which Malta would join the coalition. The Grand Master was ready to offer Britain full use of the facilities at Malta for repairs to the fleet, munitions, provisions and so on. The fleet could draw on Malta's pool of 15,000 seamen and send its sick and wounded to Malta for free treatment in the Order's hospital. The Order's fleet and the maltese privateers would protect and convoy british merchantmen trading with the Levant and, finally, De Rohan would, at short notice, provide a force of 500 knights and up to 2000 troops for service at Toulon, in the Vendée or elsewhere.

In return the Grand Master wanted adequate protection for the Order and its property and interests in Europe. De Maisonneuve believed that it might also be necessary to give the Order a subsidy or to assist it in raising a loan in Genoa because the confiscation of so many of its estates had thrown its finances into severe disarray.

Although de Maisonneuve claimed to be acting according to instructions sent to him by De Rohan, he could only show Fitzgerald his credentials as minister plenipotentiary to Poland. These, one would suppose, did not authorise him to open negotiations with Britain on the terms described above. One authority asserts that De Rohan immediately vetoed de Maisonneuve's overtures.[1] However, De Rohan's subsequent behaviour suggests that if he did indeed order de Maisonneuve to break off the contact with Fitzgerald, this was not because he did not want to try to reach an understanding with Britain but rather because de Maisonneuve had botched the job. He had not made it absolutely clear to Fitzgerald that financial assistance was the *sine qua non* for the Order to join the coalition. This point was never properly appreciated by the british government and by its representatives in the Mediterranean and it was this that eventually led to the breakdown of negotiations between the Order and Britain.

De Maisonneuve's own account of contacts with Britain in 1793 describe terms very similar to those he had offered to Fitzgerald being sent to Admiral Hood: "The Grand Master offered Admiral Hood commanding the british fleet in the Mediterranean the use of his harbours, his stores and his arsenals. He proposed to send 600 knights on the ships of the Religion to help in the defence of Toulon and finally, he allowed the Admiral to raise in the island the seamen needed to bring his crews up to complement, which, given the distance involved, would have been a lenghty and costly operation had the

1. Ryan, *op.cit.*, *p.*216.

british government been obliged to send out english seamen. But only the last of these proposals was accepted by Admiral Hood, he sent a ship of 74 guns to Malta and took on a large (*sic*) number of seamen for the english fleet." [1]

Hood's own version of this development in his report to the Admiralty is quite different. He was committed to supporting Sir Gilbert Elliot at Toulon which was being besieged by republican forces, and he was having manpower problems:

> "His Majesty's fleet under my command being so reduced in killed and wounded I was under the necessity to make application to the Grand Master of Malta for the loan of 1000 [seamen] to serve in His Majesty's fleet, engaging not to carry them out of the Mediterranean and to return them [to Malta] with what pay may be due to them when their services were no longer wanted and also to give them a month's pay in advance after they had embarked. I sent Captain Reeve of the *Captain* upon this duty who took with him two large french frigates [the *Aurora* and the *Juno*] which we captured to put a few men aboard of sufficient to navigate them; and I directed Captain Reeve to authorise the consul to draw bills for the amount of the month's advance with endorsements which I hope their lordships will be pleased to direct the Navy Board to pay."

According to Hood, therefore, the affair was a simple request for permission to recruit seamen which De Rohan "most readily and in the handsomest manner granted." Why Hood applied to Malta for seamen is not clear. Perhaps the suggestion came from Fitzgerald acting on de Maisonneuve's proposals or possibly from the Chevalier De Gain De Linan who left Toulon early in December 1793 to recruit french emigré noblemen to help in the defence of the city. William England's account of the matter was that the Grand Master had received "despatches from Lord Hood offering this Island His Majesty's protection". The background to this development is still rather obscure — possibly the discovery of the text of Hood's letter to De Rohan will solve the problem.

H.M.S. Captain sailed into Grand Harbour at dawn on 19th November 1793. By the next day Captain Samuel Reeve was busy recruiting men with the Grand Master's approval. "All possible diligence is taken to raise these people," wrote England to Grenville. In fact, De Rohan limited Reeve to recruiting volunteers only, there was no question of the Order stripping its vessels to oblige Admiral Hood.

Precisely why De Rohan accepted Hood's request — and he did so immediately — is not clear. The explanation offered by one authority; that De Rohan welcomed the opportunity to reduce unemployment in Malta is not convincing. [2] It seems unlikely that the Grand Master broke the Order's statutes on neutrality simply to provide emplpoyment for a few hundred sailors — for it seems that Hood only received some 440 Maltese sailors. The only explanation of De Rohan's behaviour, that can be based on documentary evidence, is that the

1. [*de Maisonneuve*], *op.cit.*, pp.33/34
2. Cavaliero, *op.cit.*, p.208

Grand Master wanted to impress the british government with his goodwill in order to pave the way for an agreement with Britain by which british gold would solve his financial difficulties.

Given the Order's critical financial position, it would have been the height of stupidity on De Rohan's part to allow Britain to exploit his resources without attempting to exact a suitable reward. Thus, while to show goodwill he allowed Hood and later Elliot at Corsica, to recruit a limited number of men in Malta and to buy small quantities of munitions, he refused to release any of his own troops or sailors. And he made clear by the end of 1794 that the resources of the Order were available to Britain — at a reasonable price.

Some time in 1794, two knights of the Order contacted british ministers in London. The Bailiff De La Tour De St. Quentin, a grand cross of the Order and a former general of its galleys, offered to persuade the Grand Master to put four thousand Maltese at the disposal of Britain for use on the fleet in Corsica — which had declared George III King and was being administered by Sir Gilbert Elliot as viceroy. St. Quentin explained that De Rohan could easily spare this number; he had a reserve of twenty-five thousand men. A more concrete offer came from the Chevalier De Corn who undertook to raise a regiment of foot in Malta for service in Corsica. The government acted on both offers. Elliot was instructed to apply for seamen from Malta and De Corn's proposal was submitted to George III for his approval in principle.

De Corn had asked De Rohan's permission to raise a regiment in Malta through the Regent of France. In September 1794 De Rohan had willingly agreed to the Regent's request and he explained that "were it not for the enormous losses which we have suffered and which have forced us to borrow large sums of money to defray the unavoidable expenses of government and of the Order; I would make it my duty to give even more effective support to the efforts that all the powers allied to France [i.e. to the royalists] are making to bring about the restoration of the [french] monarchy and of the throne of your august house". Armed with this letter, De Corn was able to persuade the british government to take his offer seriously.

Meanwhile, during the summer of 1794, Elliot and Hood were alarmed by reports of french designs on Malta. Early in October they engaged the services of a knight of the Order, the Chevalier De Sade, paid him a guinea a day and despatched him to Malta as a British agent. His mission was to report on the situation in Malta, presumably on the extent of french influence there and if possible to frustrate french intrigue. Elliot and Hood also gave him a letter for the Grand Master in which they warned him about the republic's plans, requested assistance from the Order's fleet and asked permission for De Sade to raise men and buy munitions in Malta.

Hood evidently thought very highly of De Sade and believed that his mission would not be a difficult one: "I have already expressed myself so very fully respecting the Chevalier De Sade," he told Elliot, "that it is unnecessary for me to say another word about him. I am perfectly persuaded the present Grand Master is fully disposed to us and very confident he will not hesitate to aid our

wishes, as far as he is able."

On 15th October 1794, shortly after De Sade arrived in Malta, De Rohan sent a most cordial and frank letter to Hood and Elliot. He was very grateful for the information about the machinations of the committee of public safety, indeed he was touched by Hood and Elliot's concern for Malta. He assured them that appropriate measures had been taken by the Order to ensure both the safety of Malta and that republican propaganda made no headway in Malta. In fact, the various diplomats accredited to Malta had provided him with the information some two months before. De Sade had explained the purpose of his mission and would be able to report on the warmth with which the Grand Master had received him. De Rohan was most interested in Hood and Elliot's proposals for the establishment of closer links between Malta and Corsica. "The rest of De Sade's stay on this Island", wrote De Rohan with a change of emphasis, "will prove to you, more than I can express in words, how much importance I attach to the valuable links that you are trying to forge between the governments of Britain and that of my Order." The Grand Master concluded his letter with these words:

> "I have left to the Chevalier De Sade the task of explaining to you and discussing with you some matters worthy of your attention and of your sense of justice. However, I have kept for myself the task of informing you frankly that, after having duly accepted the request of His Excellency Lord Hood, which was to furnish him with sailors; a request which I acceded to with the best will immaginable; I am rather surprised that none of His Britannic Majesty's Ministers of State have as yet let me know of His Majesty's satisfaction with me.
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> I mention this matter, Sirs, because in these times, when my Order is unjustly despoiled of her property in France, I must place my principle hope and trust on the generous support of your august sovereign to obtain at some time and place, through his powerful mediation, either the return of the property or its equivalent. Meanwhile I hope to gain his favour towards my Order; the feelings of concern, goodwill and friendship which my Order and I have the right to expect; through all the measures I can take and all the facilities in my power. These can be of the greatest value to England. Believe me, Sirs, I would be most grateful for any assistance from you in this matter."

This was plain speech for a letter couched in careful diplomatic language. The question was, what would De Rohan suggest as the equivalent of the Order's lost possessions. Elliot had the answer in a report from De Sade by the end of November and he passed the information to London. According to De Sade, the Order was prepared "to take a direct part in the war" and to offer Britain "all that Malta possesses; viz. one ship of the line, 2 frigates, 4 galleys, 12 galliots and 1,500 troops" in return for "a subsidy of £100,000 as the price of their cooperation". If the offer was rejected the Order would not "furnish any naval or military assistance".

De Rohan was being very reasonable indeed; at 1,200,000 *scudi* in maltese currency, the suggested subsidy amounted only twice the annual value of its former income from

France and the Order had lost much else in the rest of Europe.[1] Malta was being offered to Britain at a bargain price. However, De Rohan wanted an 'all or nothing' agreement.

Cynically, Elliot, turned the offer out of hand. The request for a subsidy, he considered in a letter to London imposed "conditions which I have no right to treat for and which I would probably not think advisable [to consider] if I had". He was, therefore, recalling De Sade to Corsica. It was clear, Elliot explained, that the Grand Master had no intention of coming to terms with the republic. De Rohan had said as much to Elliot and he had refused to recognise the republic in a public manifesto in October 1794. De Sade had also informed Elliot that there was no danger of french influence gaining any ground on the island. Elliot, presumably, considered that it was unnecessary to subsidise the Order to keep the french out of Malta if De Rohan had adopted an anti-french policy anyway. Since the Grand Master followed a policy which Britain approved of without a subsidy, why give him one?

Furthermore, De Sade had only managed to buy two hundred and thirty barrels of powder and Elliot assumed, quite incorrectly, that no more was available in Malta.[2] No doubt De Rohan was reluctant to release any of the Order's considerable supplies until the british government showed it was willing, at least in principle, to give him a subsidy.

Elliot's report advising the british government to reject De Rohan's request for a subsidy reached London early in January 1795. It seems that the government in fact decided to accept Elliot's advice as regards not giving the Order a subsidy. This is the only explanation that can be offered for the decision to send De Corn to Malta to raise a regiment. The troops would be raised if, and *only* if, "the viceroy [i.e. Elliot] shall clearly ascertain that the measure has the entire concurrence and will receive the effectual cooperation and support of the Grand Master". The object of sending De Corn to Malta, accompanied by a british officer to ensure that the regiment was publicly "embodied, clothed and armed in the Island of Malta", was to force De Rohan to abandon all pretence at neutrality. In effect, the Grand Master was being asked to declare war on France. He was not given the opportunity of avoiding the issue by permitting the maltese to join the british forces unofficially and, above all, there was no talk of a subsidy. Well might Doublet write in the summer of 1795, after the affair was over, that Britain had tried "in her Machiavellian way to force us to compromise our neutrality".[3]

De Corn, though naturally very anxious to raise and command his own regiment, was doubtless dismayed by the strict terms imposed by the british government. Indeed, he refused to accept some of the conditions. Another knight of Malta in London, the Chevalier De

1. Cf. Vassallo, G.A., *Storia di Malta*, (Malta, 1854), p.727.
2. The powder did not meet british war office standards, but it had to be accepted because Elliot was so short of munitions. In 1798 Napoleon took 1,500,000 lbs. of powder to Egypt from Malta and he left a sufficient supply for the french garrison on the Island. See Zammit, T., *Malta*, (Malta, 1929), p.289.
3. Cf., Doublet, P., *op.cit.*, p.465 ff. Quoted in Cavaliero, *op.cit.*, p.208.

Thuisy, approached Lord Grenville in an attempt to salvage something for the Order. On 27th February 1795, a Monsieur Saladin called at the foreign office and delivered De Thuisy's proposals for a formal treaty between Great Britain and the Order of St. John. The terms in this draft treaty appear to be an attempt to meet Britain's needs and at the same time to secure the semblance of some advantages for the Order.

They make pathetic reading.

Britain could have all she wanted; base facilities in Malta for her fleet, permission to recruit seamen and to raise (if she wished) two regiments of maltese for service in Corsica and the Order would bind itself not to make a separate peace with France [i.e. De Rohan would join the coalition]. In return, Britain would undertake to defend Malta in the event of its being attacked, and she would promise not to sign any treaty which did not guarantee the Order's independence in Malta. De Thuisy said nothing about a subsidy and, worse still, nothing about the restitution of the Order's property or its equivalent should there be any peace negotiations with France. The other provisions were trivial: one clause provided for the return of all runaway slaves seeking sanctuary on board naval vessels, another for the appointment of maltese petty officers and chaplains to vessels manned by maltese seamen. De Thuisy explained the necessity for chaplains thus: "The Order of Malta has the greatest interest, not only in the religious, but also in the political sense, to ensure that its subjects continue to adhere to a faith which assures it both of their love and their obedience."

The only material advantage for the Order which ,De Thuisy hinted at was in the 9th article of his draft. Britain and the Order, he suggested should come to some agreement over Corsica. He did not elaborate, except to state that the agreement would benfit Corsica as part of the british empire, the Order, and the nobility and people of Corsica. This could mean anything; but it is interesting to note that the Order had been interested in acquiring Corsica since the sixteenth century.[1] If De Thuisy hoped to win Corsica for the Order, it was a very long shot.

No other references to the negotiations between De Thuisy and Grenville have been traced. What is certain, is that De Rohan would have rejected any proposal that did not offer the Order money. Without money there, in a few years, be no Order to protect. To accede to the british government's demands, to declare war on France, would not solve the Order's problem — there was therefor no point in accepting them. De Corn's mission to Malta was doomed before he set foot on the Island.

Ironically, shortly before De Rohan knew that the british government was expecting him to abondon his neutrality and that it had refused to grant him subsidy, the Grand Master allowed the Chevalier De Sade to leave Malta for Corsica with a hundred and forty maltese military artificers and engineers. These recruits reached Corsica by the 25th May 1795, after De Corn had left for Mal-

1. Cf. Bosio, G., *Dell'Istoria della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di San Giovanni...* (Naples, 1684), Vol. 3, p.399.

ta and after Elliot had written to the Grand Master to inform him in detail about the purpose of De Corn's visit. Elliot was most impressed with the men; "they prove a most valuable acquisition. The artificers are extremely good and they are all obedient, laborious men, likely to be good soldiers in any service they may be attached to. The gunners are formed into a company on the model of the french company of artillery ...". The Grand Master's refusal to allow De Corn to raise a regiment was on the way to Malta as Elliot wrote this letter.

De Rohan did not find it too difficult to disassociate himself from De Corn. He had never committed himself to agreeing to allow Britain to raise a regiment in Malta. It was true, the Grand Master informed Elliot on 11th May 1795, that he had accepted the request of the Regent of France for a regiment to be raised in Malta. This he explained was perfectly in order, being merely a mark of respect for the Royal House of France. In any case, the Regiment, he had understood at the time, was only intended to be the prince's bodyguard. He was most annoyed with De Corn for not consulting him, as he would have explained to the knight that the Order could not do anything against the laws on neutrality. Therefore, concluded De Rohan: "All maltese who are not employed by the Order are free to embark on any ships that offer them better terms than they are able to find in their own country — this does not at all infringe our neutrality — but the raising of a regiment is a very different matter".

When De Corn and Captain Stewart arrived in Malta, the consul William England presented them to De Rohan. Their reception by the Grand Master was, doubtless, polite but cold. De Corn was told that he had exceeded his instructions and his authority to raise a regiment on behalf of the Regent was revoked. Stewart — who seems to have lacked tact — insisted on explaining to De Rohan that the regiment was to be raised publicly in Malta, even when it was obvious that the mission had failed. "The Grand Master immediately replied that he must peremptorily refuse him assent to the project altogeter". The day after Stewart received a letter from De Rohan addressed to Elliot, which he was asked to read. The Grand Master was blunt: "I have informed them [i.e. De Corn and Stewart] that it is impossible for us to permit *in any way* the recruitment with which he [Stewart] and De Corn are commissioned." Stewart called on De Rohan before leaving Malta. The Grand Master, he informed Elliot, "observed on my asking what commands he had for your excellency [Elliot], that he had not any, adding that he hoped I had found his letter to your excellency, which I had received the day before, sufficiently explicit".

De Corn and Stewart left Malta immediately and returned to Corsica. Britain had lost her first chance to acquire control of Malta.

In Britain there was a belated awareness of the importance of Malta. When the future of the Island was a burning political issue in 1803, Colonel Mark Wood, a member of parliament and formerly chief engineer in Bengal for the East India Company, published his letters to Pitt and Dundas about Malta. His first letter

was written in the autumn of 1796.[1] By this time De Rohan, his hand with Britain played out, had tried to reach a *modus vivendi* with the republic and in July 1796 he appointed a minister plenipotentiary to France.[2] The Order's negotiations with Paul I of Russia were about to start and to give the knights a bright but forlorn hope that russian gold would save the Order.[3] Northern Italy was falling to Napolean. Britain had evacuated Corsica and her fleet was about to withdraw from the Mediterranean for want of maintenance and a secure base.

Wood urged Pitt and Dundas to understand the importance of securing a *tenable* port in the Mediterranean; "So long ... as Great Britain is desirous of supporting her naval preeminance ... and of curbing the ambition and aggrandisement of France, it is absolutely necessary for her at any price, to secure some port in the Mediterranean where her fleets may retire and refit, in times of danger; and from whence our enemies can be molested." Corsica and Minorca were no good to Britain, being too close to France and too expensive to maintain — even if they could be held. The ideal base for Britain in the Mediterranean was Malta:

> "Could another Gibraltar be found higher up the Mediterranean which, exclusive of the strength of situation, possessed a good harbour, the acquisition of such a place to this country would be invaluable.
> There is small rock situated at the southern extremity of Italy, which possessing both advantages, appears to me in conjunction with Gibraltar, to be eminently calculated for commanding the Mediterranean; and, the acquisition of which, as it forms a small independent establishment of its own, unconnected with the continental powers, there is reason to believe, would not prove a matter of much difficulty.
> You must immediately perceive that the place to which I allude is the island of Malta. There have been periods, I confess, at which a negotiation for the possession of this island might have been conducted with much greater probability of success than at present. At the time when our power in the Mediterranean was triumphant, and when the apprehension of French principles and fraternization carried with it greater horror and destination than it does at present, everything was then at our devotion. Notwithstanding, however, that one opportunity has been lost, it is not improbable that, during the course of the present war, another may occur. Undoubtedly our power and consequence in the Mediterranean have lately suffered a very severe blow; yet, possibly, the powers of Italy may still see their danger, and, in place of that despondency and inaction which must render them an easy prey to the enemy, be at last roused to those exertions, which, when supported by the naval power of Britain, can alone se-

1. Wood, M., *The Importance of Malta considered, in the years* 1786 *and* 1798 ... (London, 1803). In 1779 Wood was commissioned by the Secret Committee of the East India Company to investigate the route to India via the Suez isthmus. *Ibid.*
2. Cavaliero, *op.cit.*, p.207.
3. Generally see *ibid.*, Ch.XVI and Vella, A.P., *Malta and the Czars,* (Malta, 1973).

cure their existence as independent states.

The Grand Master and Knights of Malta must doubtless see their own ruin involved in that of the Christian world, and, from a sense of danger, may be induced to unite with Britain and Ireland, which in return, can guarantee and secure to the knights, not merely their ancient priveleges, but more substantial advantages.

Half a million, or even a million sterling, would be well employed in securing to this country so valuable a port. In respect to the most advisable mode of negotiating such an agreement, it would be presumption in me to say one word.[1]

Whether Sir William Hamilton or Sir John Jervis might be serviceable in forwarding so desirable an acquisition, or who else may be best calculated for accomplishing so very important an object, His Majesty's ministers have the best means of judging. My only wish is to call the importance of this place to your attention, lest, amidst the hurry of other great and pressing concerns, this circumstance might escape your notice.

Were Providence to give us the power to place an impregnable fortress and harbour on any spot in the Mediterranean, most suitable to the views of our country, it would hardly be possible to select one preferable to Malta. It would give us completely the command of the Levant; not one ship from thence could sail to or from any port in Europe, unless by our permission, or under convoy of a superior fleet; the coasts of Spain, France, Italy, and Africa must be subject to our control, and, whilst at war with this country, be kept under necessary subjection; from Africa and Sicily we could have ample supplies for our fleets and, by the Dardanelles, from the Euxine and Caspian Seas, inexhaustible supplies of various naval stores, which, if not secured to ourselves, must inevitably find their way to the arsenals of France."[2]

In Wood's opinion unless Britain dominated the Mediterranean — and control over Malta would go far towards achieving this — the french would seize the opportunity to extend their hold over southern Europe. Then it would be relatively easy for them to occupy Egypt and thus to control a new shorter route to India:

"When I say that Egypt is contiguous to France, I wish only to express that its principal port, Alexandria, is within a few days sail of Toulon and of Marseilles. The French republic having Spain and Italy at her devotion, (which must undoubtedly be the case should we be expelled from the Mediterranean) will be capable not only of undertaking but of carrying into effect, projects, which, during the monarchy, she durst not have thought of, much less acted upon. Having possession of Egypt, which unites the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, the communication with India is expeditious and certain. In place of a traverse of five or six months round the Cape of Good Hope, with the casualties of such a voyage, the passage from Suez to

1. Our italics.
2. Wood, *op.cit.*, pp.6/7, 14 November 1796.

any part of the coast of Malabar may be performed in less than one month, and the coast of Coromandel nearly in the same time. Where then, gentlemen, will be the security of India, when, for every man we can send, the French will have the means of pouring in thousands?

I know it may be argued, that there is some difficulty of finding transports in the Red Sea, and that an English fleet in the Straits of Babel Mandel will be a certain remedy for the apprehended evil. Whoever reasons in this manner, let me beg of him to reflect how many superior fleets we must thus be obliged to keep to be guarded at every point; and whether or not the enormous expense of so many fleets, and establishments would not, in the course of a little time, prove fatal to our country.

It is better to foresee and prevent evils, than, by slumbering in a false security, suffer ourselves to be surprised. The possession of Malta, whilst it would give us the complete command of the Mediterranean, and of the Levant, and prove the most effectual curb that could be devised to the ambitious projects of the new republic; would, at the same time, be the most likely means of protecting our eastern empire ..."[1]

Wood therefore considered that Britain would be well advised to invest between one half and one million pounds on coming to some arrangement with the Order.

Dundas replied that though he was well aware of the importance of Malta — indeed he had been for four years — it was not as easy to reach an agreement with the Order as Wood seemed to think. This was of course far from true; as has been seen, it was Britain that refused to give the Order a subsidy. Besides, Dundas continued, Malta was too far to the East to be of much practical value. In other words the government had failed to appreciate the real value of Malta during their attempts to find a base nearer Toulon.[2] In this sense, as far as the government was concerned, Malta was not, in 1795, worth £100,000

In April 1798, as french preparations in Toulon neared maturity, Wood wrote to Dundas urging him to take immediate steps to seal the Red Sea. It was too late, he pointed out, to acquire Malta or to save Egypt; the government should act to preserve British India.

"The possession of Malta, is not at present within our reach, otherwise, in place of one million. at which, two years ago, I said it would be a cheap purchase to Great Britain, at the price of *ten millions*[3] it would be a wise economy, as the expense of the great additional force necessary for the protection of India, supposing it could be saved (exclusive of other important political considerations), would soon exceed that sum.

We are not therefore to consider how we can prevent France from possessing herself of Egypt, for that, I apprehend, we have not the means of doing; but we are to determine

1. Wood, *op.cit.*, p.9.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 11, Wood to Dundas, 25 April 1798.
3. Our italics.

by what means we can best prevent her from availing herself of the great resources and advantages which the possession of that country must afford her for quickly expelling us from India.[1]

Of course Wood exaggerated the danger to India. Nonetheless he was correct on one vital point: a successful British policy in the Mediterranean depended on the availability of a secure base for the fleet. The only base which could have met Britain's needs in the 1790's was Malta; and in 1795 the british government had thrown away a golden opportunity to acquire it.

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1. Wood, *op.cit.*, p.13, Wood to Dundas, 25 April 1798.