

SO MUCH TO DO; SO LITTLE DONE

An appeal for more research in Malta

By BRO. LEO BARRINGTON

I ONCE heard that well known surgeon, the late Professor P.P. de Bono, say 'When I was studying in England, I wrote several original papers on Surgery. On my return to Malta I did little original writing; the environment, the atmosphere seemed to be against it.' Now P.P. de Bono was an F.R.C.S. which is about the highest qualification a surgeon can obtain in England. Was there any justification for his curious statement? My own view is that there is absolutely no reason why more original research should not be done in Malta; in fact there is much work waiting to be done and should be done by those on the spot.

It cannot but strike the casual stranger when he scans the books and papers about the island, that much of the original work has been done by outsiders. Archaeology, history, geography, geology, medicine, all have been studied and original work published in these disciplines about the island by foreigners. In archaeology one thinks of John Davies Evans, Elisabeth de Manneville, Dr. Trump; in history Mr Ryan, Miss Schemerhorn, Harrison Smith, Mlle Claire Engel and a host of Italian and French historians of the Order of St. John; in medicine David Bruce, famous as co-discoverer of the cause of undulant fever; in geography the Durham school under Prof. W.B. Fisher; in geology of Dr. Hyde and Dr. Morris and in engineering that unhonoured man, perhaps one of the greatest benefactors of Malta, Osbert Chadwick. Now I am perfectly aware that there are a number of Maltese who have also done remarkable work. It would be invidious to mention living savants of which the number is growing, but perhaps the greatest has been the late Sir. T. Zammit, eminent in two disciplines - archaeology and medicine.

It is of course true that in the past opportunities for equipping oneself for research were few. Compulsory education was enacted in 1946, less than twenty years ago, and the possibilities of studying abroad were remote, though it is useful to recall that teachers have been sent abroad to England for training in St. Mary's College since 1881. But today many of these disadvantages are disappearing. The Royal University has evening and postgraduate courses, there are quite good chances for the clever young man or woman to frequent European or American academies

of learning, and the population is in fact becoming completely literate. The Royal University has, in the past fifteen years, received more ample funds from overseas and its staff has been greatly augmented in quality and quantity. I can recall the days, comparatively recent, when there was only one University teacher in the Faculty of English and his salary was the princely sum of £420 per annum. To mention again those no longer with us, the Royal University owes a great debt to Professor Ifor Evans and Dame Lillian Penson who assisted in the obtaining of grants. There are also two Government Training Colleges, as well equipped as their English counterparts for ensuring the competency of our teachers, and with new technical schools, an expanded Lyceum and Girls' Secondary schools, as well as a Polytechnic, it is clear that centres of learning are being rapidly expanded.

I said above that much original work is waiting to be done. One of the most essential to my mind would be a study of the best methods of teaching English to Maltese children. Much effort has been expended on this work but much more research on methodology is needed. Each nation has to work out its own salvation here in the light of the structure of its own language. Methods of teaching English to Japanese students are by no means the same as teaching English to Dutch students. Without a serious knowledge of one of the five principal European languages – English, Spanish, French, Italian, German – a student in Malta is gravely handicapped.

In archaeology there are many problems awaiting solution. The temples have been studied but the area around them awaits investigation by a skilled archaeologist. Would University students be prepared to spend the major part of their summer holidays wielding pick and shovel without pay and in the interests of archaeology? Yet this precisely is what is done by many students in other lands. The Museums of Malta contain historical treasures, but there are large numbers of similar treasures in the more opulent private houses. No catalogue of these exists. Have we a brave and enterprising man who would undertake such a work? Not only would he have to be knowledgeable but also supremely tactful. It might be remarked, *en passant*, that works of historical interest in the houses of the ancient aristocracy in England have practically all been catalogued long ago.

Malta has had a number of historians from Abela downwards. Books on the Great Siege, perhaps the most important event in the island after the coming of St. Paul, are numerous. But where can we find an account of the part played by the Maltese? One of the most assiduous students of the Knights of St. John, Mlle Claire Engel in her latest book *L'Ordre de*

Malte en Méditerranée has this to say: 'Les archives sont d'une richesse extraordinaire, elles sont pratiquement vierges, mais elles sont à La Vallette' – 'The archives are wonderfully rich; they are practically untouched, but you have to seek them in Valetta.' Mr Roderick Cavaliero in his successful *Last of the Crusaders* writes 'In the Royal Malta Library in Valetta are stored the thousands of manuscript volumes that compose the Archives of the Order, together with thousands more of related interest ... it is to be hoped that those students in search of a subject for their Ph.D. will begin to think of Malta with its complete collection of documents, its friendly people and its agreeable climate.' Mr Ryan, author of *Malta* and of *The House of the Temple* told the present writer that when he was working on the latter book in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, he had to untie the dossiers of a number of the Knights of St. John killed during the French Revolution and these dossiers had never been opened since that time. French and English experts therefore agree that there are many treasures in the Royal Library awaiting discovery.

Since the foundation of a Chair of Maltese in the Royal University, much has been done to further the study of the national language and the influence of the Chair has been considerable. Folklore too is being studied but on account of the mobility of the population and the growth of towns, much of the ancient wisdom will soon be lost unless these beliefs and customs, passed down by oral tradition only, are written down by the student who has the confidence of the country people.*

When I came to Malta, one of the first books I sought was a compendium which would give, between two covers a brief summary of general information about Malta, and all that a visitor or permanent resident might like to know. I was told that such a book did not exist, and that there was no demand for it either. I disagreed with the latter statement, so I sat down and edited the first number of the Malta Year Book and several of the successive numbers. Apparently it did fulfil a demand as it now appears regularly under the able editorship of the Rev. B. Hilary, one of my colleagues, and I understand that its circulation is still rising. Much of the first edition was written during the hot afternoons of July and August. Let no one think that it is impossible to work hard during the summer heats. This is what Dr. W.S. Ladell wrote in the *Unesco Courier*: 'Many in hot countries prefer to take life quietly, to move slowly, to take

* A scholarly journal *Maltese Folklore Review* entirely devoted to the study of Maltese folklore and customs has been edited by Mr. J. Cassar Pullicino formerly the editor of *Melita Historica* and the author of several books on Maltese folklore, since 1962. (The Editor).

no exercise, to sleep frequently, to avoid sweating. By suitable clothing, by keeping out the sun and being in a breeze, not putting up heat production, a man can avoid sweating, but for a productive life in a hot country a man must be willing to sweat.'

Intellectual work requires will power, perseverance and time. Maltese can do as well as any other nation. The fact is that in the past ten years, a number of young people from the island have gone abroad and distinguished themselves in hard and exacting mental toil and have attained high honours. It is especially to the men and women who have been able to profit by long years of study at the University that the demand goes forth: 'Fructify your talents, turn your minds to the work to be done at home.'