

Annibale Preca, an author and philologist



Fr Hermann Duncan

Very few people know about Annibale Preca. This article sheds some light on who he was and the contribution he left on Maltese society.

Annibale Preca was born in Hal Lija on 22nd March 1852.

He is best known as an author and philologist who strived tirelessly, to spread the tuition of the Maltese language. As a boy he attended Lyceum and later became a teacher at the Mosta Government School.

We can say that Preca was one of the early writers who founded the fundamentals of Maltese Literature.

At the time, the Maltese language was abandoned and people were neglected, nobody taught Maltese or had an interest in the language. Annibale Preca did not wish for the Maltese language to phase out.

Together with his friend Alfons Maria Galea, who was a true Christian and national, and cherished the language as much as he did, embarked on developing the language.

The Maltese writers of the time encountered many obstacles and great distress.

Disruption came mainly from Maltese graduates, who were never taught Maltese literature and were encouraged to make fun of their language and would hamper any writing in Maltese.

Annibale Preca was not one of these! Above all he was a good Christian and thus wished for others as he wished for himself. He recognized the benefits of education for the formation of his character and that of other people.

The masses would have to be reached everywhere to achieve this in their everyday language and thus Preca studied and worked hard for Maltese, struggling as much as he could to see it taught in schools even in the remotest villages of Malta and Gozo which in those days were stranded to the darkness of ignorance.

Today, we still find the threat to the formation of the religious and Maltese character.

Annibale Preca in spite of being a good writer was a very



religious man.

Everyday he would recite the office of the saints, for two decades he was procurator of the Church of Hal Lija. He also used to take care of the Charity donations and was one of the lawyers of St. Peter of the Santa Sede.

Annibale had a good conscience, and together with Alfons Maria Galea, and other religious and laity, he wrote to teach the people, whose writings today can still be enjoyed as they are light in style and intended for people of a low education.

Preca was a very positive person and always had a smile on his face.

He took everything with a pinch of salt. This was important to alleviate the pinches of bad tongues who instead of being constructive did what they could to demotivate him.

But Preca strove on to achieve his dream for the wealth and prosperity of all Maltese people.

Writings

Preca's humorous spirit can be seen in many of his writings most notably in his 'Djalogu bejn Tabib, imniehru mxammar mal-Malti' (Dialogue between an arrogant Doctor, with a Maltese) in the journal *Ward u Zahar* which he intended to publish as part of his Maltese tuition. This discussion can be found in the book *Mghodija taz-Zmien* or in the third book of *Ward ta' Qari Malti*.

Sur Fons in the magazine *l-Malti* of September, 1928 the organ of the *Maltese Writers Association*, gave a short summary on his friend and teacher Annibale Preca.

In this article he wrote that when he and his brother were young, Preca was their headmaster, and to make them laugh, he used to swear that his father hailed from the race of one of the thieves of the Greek Sea.

From the writings of Sur Fons, we know that Preca was a 'poor' headmaster, who never

Saggio Intorno Alla Lingua Maltese Come Affine Dell' Ebraico (1880)

Annibale Preca

Annibale Preca and one of the books he wrote

travelled further than Gozo; that at sixteen he became headmaster of the Mosta Government School; that when he grew older, Sur Fons got to know him better and learnt that he knew Italian, English, Latin, Spanish and French in addition to having a good knowledge of the Jewish language and some Portuguese and Greek as well.

Sur Fons tells us that Preca was his first headmaster of Italian, English and Latin; and later on taught him Spanish, and encouraged him to write Maltese books. The first book of the series *Moghdiya taz-zmien* was named *Dik Xortik!*. It was written for him by Annibale Preca.

We will now take a look at some of Preca's writings.

Preca wrote *Saggio Intorno alla Lingua Maltese come affine dell' Ebraico*, published in 1880.

He wrote *Storja tal-Knisja*, a book of 510 pages. He translated various books into Maltese including the book *Imitazzjoni ta' Kristu*.

Preca also wrote *Gabra ta'*

poeziji cajtiera ghat-tfal, Tifsira fuq il-koiba tal-Bibbja, Zieda tal-ewwel Ktieb tal-Qari Malti tal-Gvern (1880) u Alfabet Fonetiku Malti for the local Government Schools.

His best work *Malta Cananea, ossia investigazioni filologico-etimologiche ne' linguaggio Maltese*, was a work that encompassed a lot of lexical research which he put together to enable him to build his thesis about the origins of Maltese.

Preca didn't write just for the sake of writing good works, but to teach. In his lovely novels which are of a humorous nature, like *Zewg Siggijiet Battala* which can be found in the *Third Book - Ward ta' Qari Malti*, Preca seems to write with enjoyment at expressing himself in Maltese. This type of fun was expressed by Preca in all his writings.

Sadly Preca passed to eternal life in 1901. May the Lord grant him eternal rest.

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