

Vanity Fair Governors

The pair of historical articles on these pages mark the start of a short series of five articles by **Christopher Grech** that will feature the British Governors of Malta who enjoyed the (sometimes dubious) honour of being caricatured by *Vanity Fair* magazine's resident artist. The Governors to be featured are Sir Henry Storks (1864-67), Sir Lintorn Simmons (1884-1888), Sir Francis (later Baron) Grenfell (1899-1903), Baron Methuen (1915-1919) and Sir Herbert (later Viscount) Plumer (1919-1924). Storks was drawn by Carlo Pellegrini, who used the *nom de crayon* "Ape" (bee in Italian); the remainder by Sir Leslie Ward under the name of "Spy", which he claimed allowed him "to observe secretly, or to discover at a distance or in concealment".

Governor Methuen (1915-1919)

Paul Sandford Methuen was a soldier through and through, such that his whole life revolved around military service. Born in 1845, he joined the army in 1862, held numerous posts and saw action in various parts of the British Empire, notably in Egypt, the Sudan and South Africa. Methuen was also an experienced administrator, having been appointed general officer commanding-in-chief in South Africa, and subsequently Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Natal in 1910.

Although Methuen rose to the highest rank in the British Army, being promoted to Field Marshal in 1911, he was a modest and private man imbued with an innate sense of duty. An excellent example of this is given by the American historian and educator, Andrew Dickson White, who encountered Methuen when the latter served as military attaché in Berlin (1871-1888).

White recounts that one winter's day, as Methuen was strolling through the Thiergarten, he spotted a workman fling himself into the river. Methuen instantly jumped into the icy stream, grappled with the unfortunate soul, pulled him out of the water, laid him out on the bank and promptly walked off. When rumours of this rescue started circulating around the diplomatic corps the modest young officer blushing pooh-pooed the whole affair.

However, this was not to be the end of the matter. Soon afterwards, White records that one evening while he was enjoying a private event to which the German Emperor, Wilhelm I, was invited, the old Emperor sent for colonel Methuen, and on his arrival took from his own coat a medal for life-saving and pinned it to the embarrassed attaché's breast.

Age prevented Methuen from active involvement in World War I; however, he used his time as Governor and Commander-in-Chief, Malta from 1915 to 1919 to prepare for the "wreckage of battle" that would result from the Mediterranean theatre of war.

Under his guidance and Lady Methuen's fervent support, local medical facilities proliferated; existing hospitals were expanded, barracks and schools were pressed into service so that eventually 27 hospitals and 25,000 beds were provided for the wounded of the Dardanelles expedition. The first convoy of wounded arrived in Malta on May 4, 1915, and their presence solicited much admiration and respect locally.

Soon after this date, Maltese officers as well as numerous labourers were despatched to various theatres of war. A dinner given by the members of the Casino Maltese on June 15,



Casino Maltese dinner menu, June 19, 1915.

1915, marked the departure from Malta for the battle front of the following officers of the Royal Malta Artillery: Major W. Savona, Lieutenant A. V. Falzon Sant Manduca, Lieutenant W. R. Gatt, and Lieutenant A. Gatt. Methuen was guest of honour.

In attendance were numerous officers of the King's Own Malta Regiment of Militia, including Major A. Arrigo, Colonel A. Briffa, Baron E. J. de Piro, Major F. P. Denaro, Captain A. E. Micallef and A. Zammit Cutajar.

Even before the war was over, Methuen was thinking of the ongoing care of British servicemen in Malta. In a letter to *The Times* of London, dated August 23, 1918, he praised the Merchant Sailor's Rest Home and proposed that a hospital be built that would cater "not only for merchant sailors and their dependents, but also for any English men, women, and children living in Malta".

Methuen suggested that the hospital would act as a reminder to the Maltese of the 132,000-plus patients who had recently passed through Malta and of the "noble manner in which the people of Malta have done all in their power to aid the several charitable societies in making their lives happy".

The estimated cost was £7,000 (eventually to rise to £16,000). Methuen himself donated £300, which would fund three beds. The Governor also identified a suitable site "above the Merchant Seamen's Rest and close to the Grand Harbour".

By September 30, the directors of the British and Foreign Sailors' Society had voted £3,000 for the hospital, and in a letter sent

from the Palace dated October 24, Methuen was able to inform Sir John Clark that he had "already received a far more liberal support than I could have expected".

"Under Methuen's guidance local medical facilities proliferated; existing hospitals were expanded, barracks and schools were pressed into service so that eventually 27 hospitals and 25,000 beds were provided for the wounded of the Dardanelles expedition"

Lady Methuen laid the foundation stone of the hospital on March 27, 1919, however, it was Governor Plumer who inaugurated the new King George V Seamen's Memorial Hospital on November 30, 1922.

The naval presence in the Mediterranean, which included not just the British but the French and Italian navies, meant that the Malta Dockyard came under great pressure to service these fleets during the war. The increased workload brought affluence to Malta, however the immediate post-war period was one of great turmoil around the world; Malta was no exception.

The new prosperity in Malta brought an increase in the cost of living; however, a large number of demobilised soldiers and discharged civilians found employment scarce. The seeds of unrest had been sown among the local population. The situation was becoming desperate, and things were starting to get out of hand.

Lord Methuen's tour of duty at Malta came to its natural conclusion on April 29, 1919. The next Governor, Sir Herbert Plumer, was not due to arrive until June 10. This left an auspicious vacuum of power for a few fateful weeks.

The author acknowledges Dr Charles Savona Ventura's publications for information relating to the King George V Seamen's Memorial Hospital.

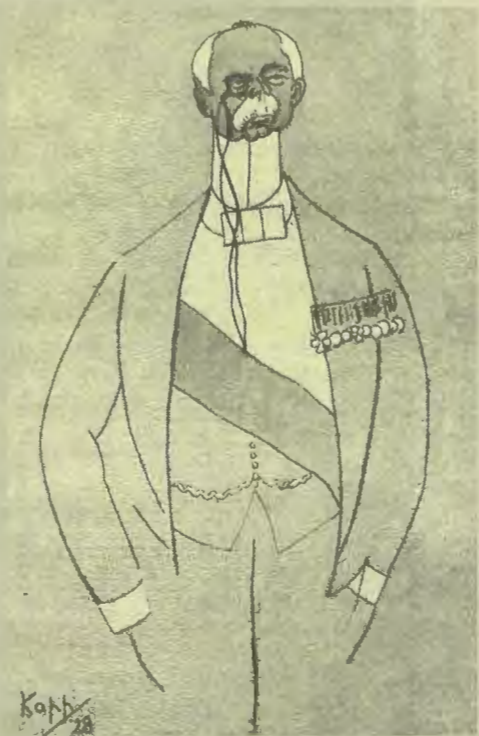


Governor Plumer (1919-1924)

It was while Sir Herbert Plumer was sailing to Malta, that the Sette Giugno riots erupted in Malta. The new Governor arrived in Malta on June 10, just three days after the riots in which four Maltese had been killed.

Images of Plumer make him out to be something of a Colonel Blimp; a thick brush of a moustache on an amiably chubby face. He also sported a monocle that gave him an air of hauteur and aloofness – a far cry from the popular image of a war hero. And yet he proved to be the man for the moment: a tested leader of men, kindly, resolute and fearless. Having just relinquished command of the Army of Occupation in Germany he was experienced in the handling of strikes and demonstrations.

Herbert Charles Onslow Plumer was born in London in 1857. Educated at Eton College and the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, he was commissioned into the York and Lancaster Regiment in 1876. He joined his battalion in Lucknow, India, and later served with distinction in the Sudan and South Africa. In World War I, he commanded V Corps, which he led at



Lord Plumer portrait impression by Edmond Kapp, 1928.



Lt-General Methuen, Scots' Guards.



Three field marshals (from left) Field Marshal Viscount Plumer, Field Marshal Sir Claud Jacob and Field Marshal Baron Methuen, 1931.

the second Battle of Ypres. It was at the Battle of Messines that Plumer distinguished himself by winning a decisive victory over the German Army.

After the disaster of the Battle of Caporetto, Plumer was given command, in November 1917, of the British Expeditionary Force in Italy. Plumer was one of the best performing and most highly regarded officers in the Allied forces. He was always considerate of his men and sparing of their lives.

In the aftermath of the war, all sectors of Maltese society were dissatisfied. Dr Filippo Sciberras took the initiative and rallied his fellow citizens to take action. Through his encouragement, a National Assembly was formed of representatives of every constituted body. The assembly decided unanimously to request the British government to allow the Maltese to have full political and administrative autonomy in local matters.

As a result of this request, when Plumer was sent out to Malta he had been charged with evaluating how feasible it would be to grant the Maltese people their wish without jeopardising imperial interests.

At the end of May, Dr Sciberras had been informed of Plumer's charge and the National Assembly implemented a commission to draft a Constitution in readiness for discussion with the new Governor when he arrived. In the meantime, events started to get out of control and British troops fired on the rioters.

When Plumer arrived in Malta the atmosphere was tense; troops guarded the streets, and although there was no violence, a palpable air of hostility could be felt. Undeterred, Plumer got out of the official car and walked calmly through a crowd of thousands assembled in St George's Square. This worked in his favour and he was seen to be engaged.

The Governor set to work immediately. Between his arrival in Malta at 9.30am and noon the same day, Plumer had received a delegation of Maltese, listened to them sympathetically and inspired them with the confidence that their grievances would be heard and acted upon. Plumer had defused a tense situation and conditions were gradually returned to normal. So much so that when he was raised to the peerage in October 1919 as Baron Plumer of Messines, Malta welcomed the news and celebrated with him.



Admiralty sloop *Bryony* leaving Grand Harbour with Lord and Lady Plumer on board, May 16, 1924. PHOTO: S. L. CASSAR

By August 1919, the National Assembly had drafted a Constitution whereby a local government would deal with local matters, such as civil legislation, public instruction and finance. Items of imperial interest (defence, naval and military services and functions) would be dealt with by Westminster. Governor Plumer threw his support behind this constitution, and by 1921 Malta was granted self-government.

On the April 30, 1921, the Letters Patent authorising the new Constitution were promulgated in a ceremony lasting two and a quarter hours held in the hall of St Michael and St George at the Palace where the Governor read out the text of the Constitution. The accompanying image records this event. Dr (later Sir) Filippo Sciberras, president of the National Assembly, was a guest of honour at the ceremony. So overcome was the elder statesman by this milestone achievement that he fainted at the end of the ceremony.

Elections followed soon after and a government was formed. The inauguration of the new Parliament occurred on November 1, 1921, when His Royal Highness Edward, Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII), stopped in Malta on his way to India, to perform the ceremony. It was also on this occasion that Dr Sciberras was rewarded for his patriotism and awarded a knighthood.

In June 1888, Plumer married his second cousin Annie Constance Goss. They had a son and three daughters. On January 27, 1920, the Plumers' youngest daughter Marjorie married Major William Hallily Brooke, MC, the Governor's aide-de-camp. The ceremony took place at St Paul's Anglican Cathedral in Valletta. *The Derby Daily Telegraph* reported that Valletta was en fête and the streets through which the marriage procession



Sir Herbert Plumer by Spy, Vanity Fair, 1902.

passed were crowded with people who cheered with great enthusiasm.

When Plumer left Malta in May 1924 he left to a hero's farewell. Newspapers recorded that "The greatest popular send-off ever received by a departing Governor was certainly that accorded to Field-Marshal Lord Plumer".

Valletta as beflagged and placarded with such inscriptions as "Plumer, Father of the Maltese" and he and his wife were cheered and showered with flowers from roofs and balconies; their car was accompanied by civic bands and cheering crowds down to the Customs House and multitudes lined the Grand Harbour.

The final image shows a rare scene: three field marshals (Plumer, Jacob and Methuen) two of whom were former Governors of Malta, posing for a photograph at the annual meeting and prize-giving at the Royal Soldiers' Daughters Home at Hampstead, London, on July 14, 1931. Both former Governors retain an air of dignity and composure even in old age; sadly both were to 'fade away' the following year.