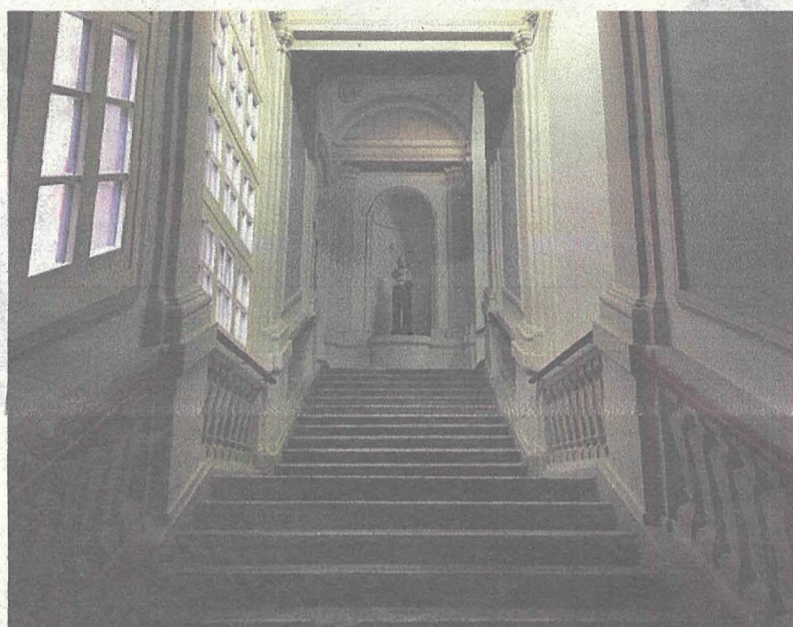
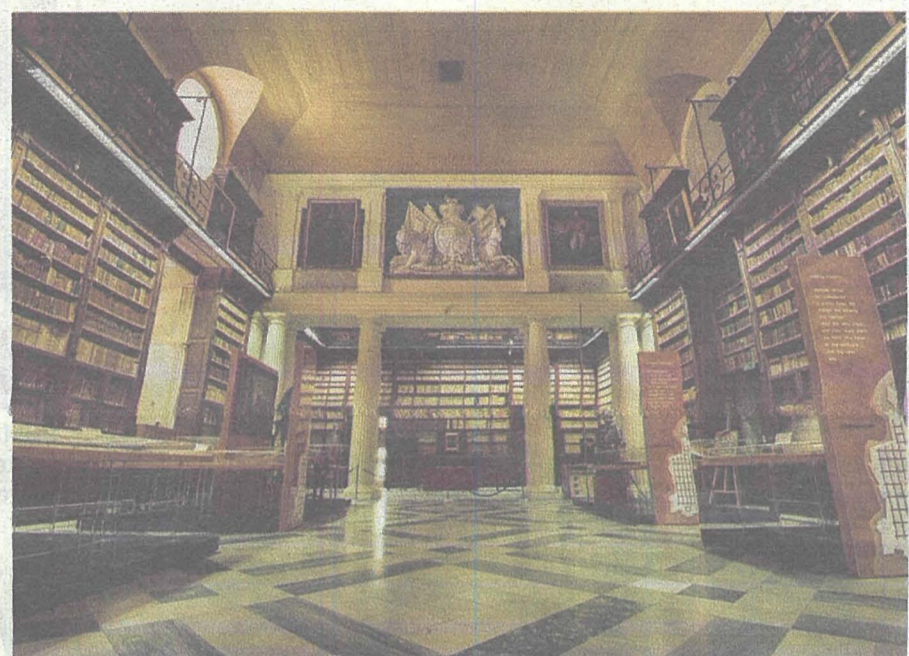


LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY

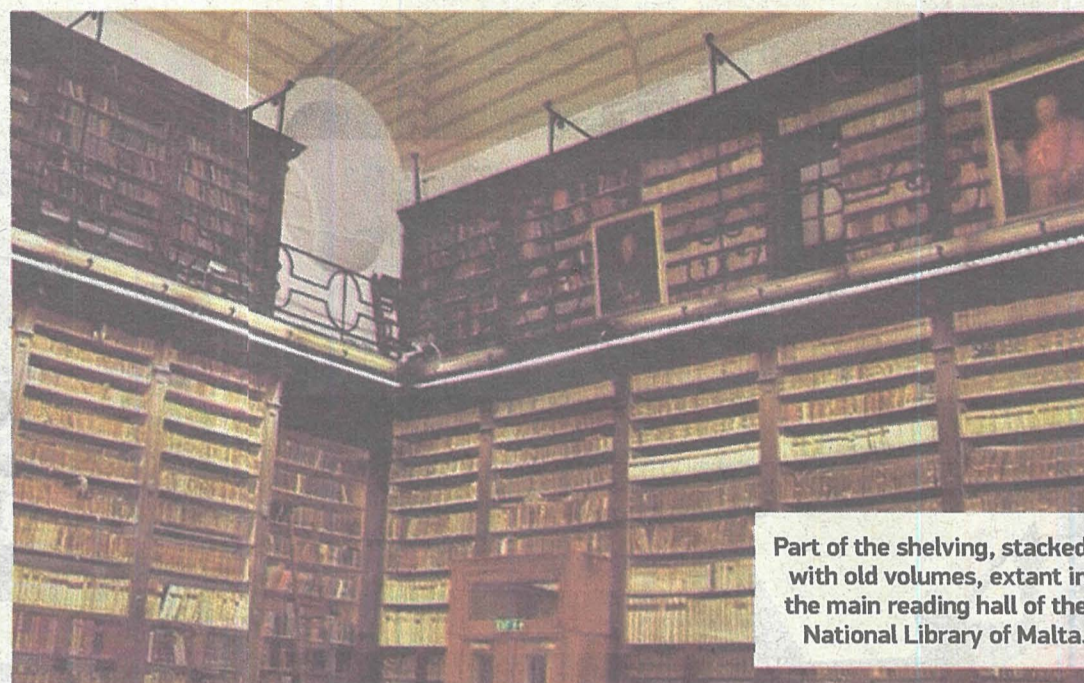
It happened in December



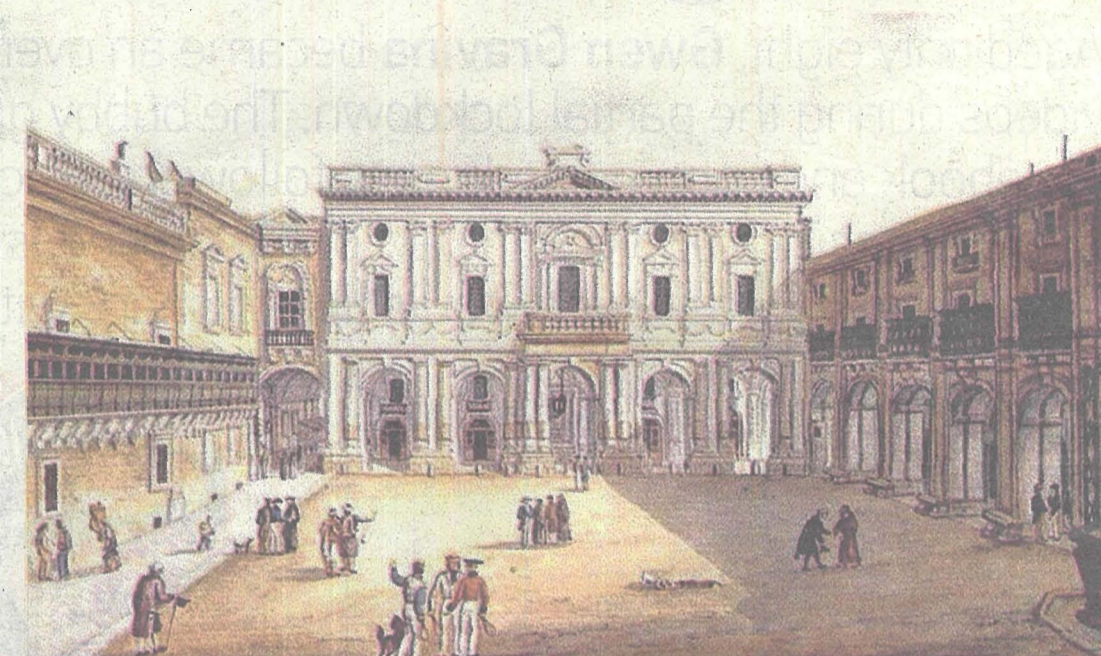
The grand staircase of the National Library of Malta. PHOTOS COURTESY: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MALTA



The main reading hall of the National Library of Malta.



Part of the shelving, stacked with old volumes, extant in the main reading hall of the National Library of Malta.



Charles de Brockdorff's depiction of the National Library of Malta in the 19th century.

Jean Louis Guerin de Tencin – founder of the National Library of Malta



JOSEPH F. GRIMA

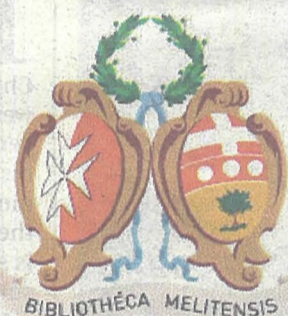
the capture of a Tripolitanian galliot in 1740. In 1742, he was appointed the Order's ambassador to the Holy See in Rome, where he served till 1749.

A noteworthy achievement during De Tencin's tenure of office in Rome was the acquisition of equal rights of censorship for the Grand Master. Before 1747, censorship rights in Malta lay with the local inquisitor and the bishop while censored material could only be countersigned by the Order's representative under a dividing line – *interiecta linea* – thus placing the Order in an inferior position. De Tencin's diplomacy was instrumental in paving the way for the eventual final introduction of printing in Malta, which could only take place once the rights of the Grand Master were fully asserted.

One of the great repositories of the materials for knowledge and the study of our islands' history is undoubtedly the National Library of Malta, formerly known as the Royal Malta Library, and originally established under the name of *Pubblica Biblioteca*. It traces its history to well over two and a half centuries ago, to the third quarter of the 18th century, when it was founded through the efforts of an eminent Knight of the Order of St John, the Frenchman Fra Jean Louis Guerin de Tencin, who was born on December 27, 1702, and is therefore the subject of this month's anniversary story.

Born at Grenoble, in southeast France, Jean Louis was schooled and groomed for an eventual career in the Order of St John. When he was 14 years old, he was admitted into the Langue of Provence, and at first, since he was still a minor, served as a page to Grand Master Raimondo Perellos y Rocafel. He took his duties seriously, thus paving the way for a number of promotions within the Order.

In 1738, he was appointed Grand Cross and, in 1739, Captain-General of the Gallies. The latter part of his naval career is notable for



The emblem of the National Library of Malta which, fittingly, includes the coat-of-arms of Jean Louis Guerin de Tencin.

figure, a fact exemplified by the 1758 unfounded news item in foreign gazettes which reported the death of Grand Master Manuel Pinto de Fonseca and the accession of De Tencin as his successor. From 1760 onwards, he directed his energy to the setting up and establishment of a public library in Malta, the first of its kind in our islands. De Tencin passed away on June 10, 1766, aged 63.

De Tencin's compilation of the catalogue of his personal library was carried out between 1749 and 1760. This work is presented in three parts: a preface, the order of the catalogue, and an alphabetical index of the books. There are several main sections, including religion, philosophy, history, arts and sciences. There are also sub-divisions. Sections about geography, prints and journals are also included.

These sections, selected from various others, are enough to demonstrate that De Tencin's interests were very wide and that his knowledge must have been encyclopaedic. But his main contribution to culture in Malta is in one main direction – the foundation of a public library.

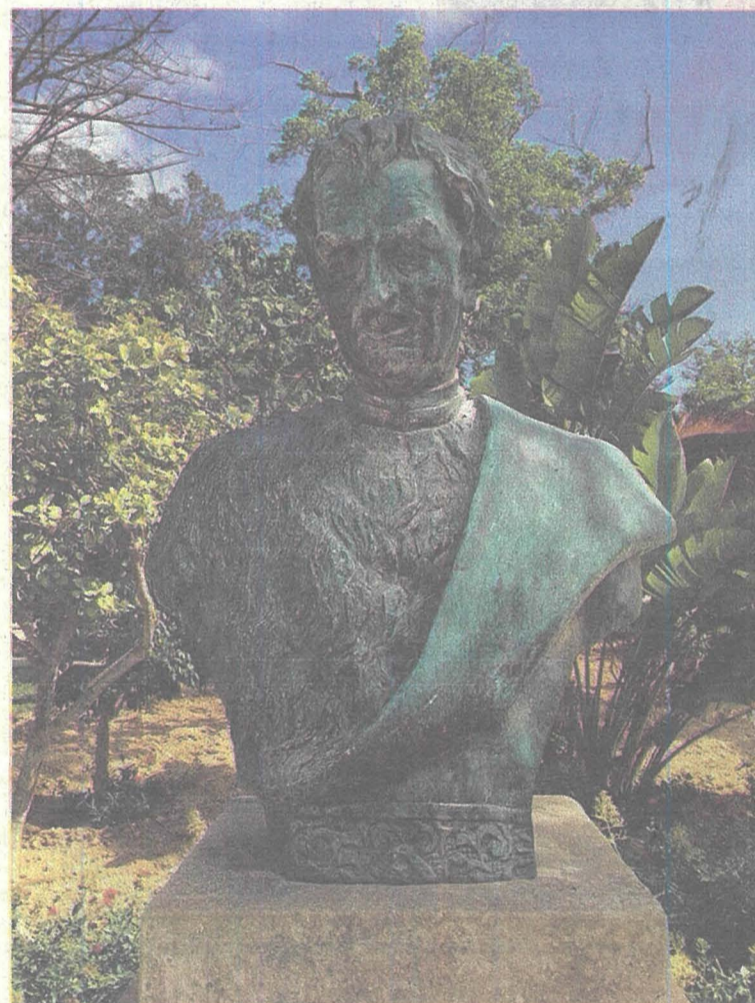
De Tencin's friend, the already-mentioned Cardinal Portocarrero, died at Rome in 1760 and he bequeathed his library and collection of scientific and mathematical instruments to the Order of St John. On getting to know this, De Tencin submitted a petition to the Procurators of the Order's Treasury in which he stated that it was his intention to found a public library at Malta and, for this reason, he wished to acquire the late cardinal's books under certain conditions, as outlined hereunder:

1. The cardinal's books and mathematical instruments would be delivered to De Tencin who would pay the sum of 7,000 scudi in seven consecutive instalments of 1,000 scudi each, starting from 1762;
2. De Tencin would then be bound to donate his whole collection to the Order of St John;
3. De Tencin would remain keeper of the books to the end of his life and use them for the formation of a public library;
4. If, on De Tencin's death, there were any missing items, payment for them would be exacted from his estate.

De Tencin's scheme was accepted and approved. In 1761, he rented a house situated in Strada San Giorgio (present Republic Street) corner with Strada della Vittoria (present St Lucy Street) and known as *Il Forfantone*. This house was to be the first public library in Malta and it was in this place that Cardinal Portocarrero's collection was first housed. The volumes were bound and regilded, where necessary, in a workshop on the ground floor of the Castellania in Strada San Giacomo (now the Medical and Health Department in Merchants Street).

“From 1760 onwards, he directed his energy to the setting up and establishment of a public library in Malta, the first of its kind in our islands”

But more books were to be added. In 1555, the Order's Chapter-General stipulated that books belonging to deceased knights were to be collected to form a library. This stipulation seems to have become a dead letter but, at the Chapter-General of 1612, a similar decision was taken and,



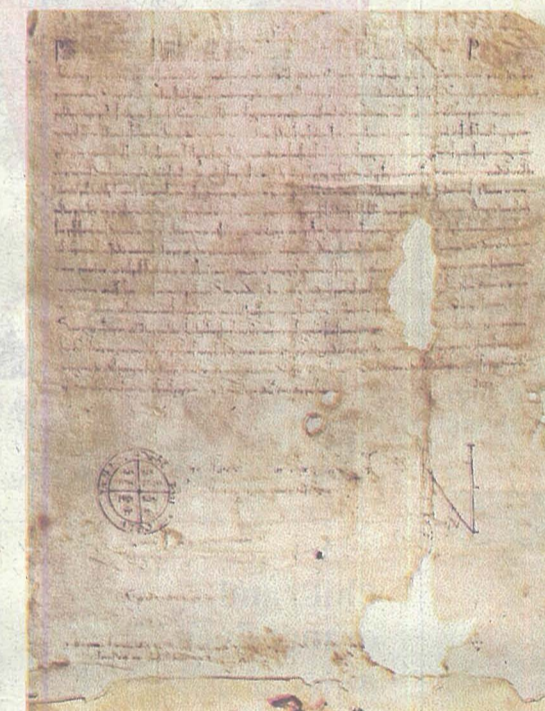
A bust depicting Canon G. P. Agius de Soldanis (1712-70) in Victoria, Gozo.

by 1636, a library under the responsibility of the Grand Prior was in existence. This library was known as the *Biblioteca di San Giovanni*, and remained in existence till 1763. After 1650, they were housed in premises attached to St John's Conventual Church (now the Co-Cathedral).

In 1760, the Keeper of the Library, Fra Jean Baptiste Gras, was asked to prepare an inventory of the books. But in 1763, he reported that most of the books,

which numbered about 3,000 volumes, were worm-eaten. Therefore, on September 20, 1763, the Procurators of the Treasury ordered that this library was to be transferred to the safekeeping of De Tencin who was to retain, sell or discard the individual books according to their state or if they were duplicates. Any funds thus accrued would be allotted to the upkeep of the library.

The library, therefore, grew considerably and now also included



The *Pie Postulatio Voluntatis* of 1113, one of the precious manuscript holdings of the National Library of Malta. Right: Antoine Favray's depiction of Cardinal Joaquín Portocarrero, which is hung in a prominent place in the Main Hall of the National Library of Malta. PHOTOS COURTESY: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MALTA



the considerable bequest of the Commendatore De Sainte Igey (who died in 1765) and the library of the suppressed Order of St Anthony of Vienna, which was acquired in 1781. The whole collection now topped 10,000 works in 20,000 volumes and, in 1763, the Gozitan scholar Canon Gian Francesco Agius de Soldanis was drafted in to help De Tencin. The latter provided de Soldanis with lodgings and monthly emolments of 10 scudi. De Soldanis was, therefore, the first librarian of the Public Library and was responsible for the compilation of the early catalogues of the collection which still exist in the library's manuscript collection.

Unfortunately, De Tencin passed away before he could carry out his

desire to endow the newly-founded library with the necessary funds for upkeep and maintenance. He had, however, successfully seen his scheme through its initial teething troubles. De Soldanis continued as librarian until he died in 1770. Fittingly, the library became known as the *Biblioteca Tansiana*, and De Tencin's purpose was fully acknowledged by the 1776 Chapter-General of the Order, which solemnly decreed the raising of a *Pubblica Biblioteca*.

But the *Forfantone* was no longer suitable premises for a public library and a proper biblioteca was built, and completed in 1796, to the plans of Stefano Ittar (c.1730-90) who had been commissioned with the job in 1784. How-

ever, the transfer of the library to the new premises never took place under the Order, and it was only in 1812, under Malta's Civil Commissioner Sir Hildebrand Oakes, that the new library opened its doors to the public on June 4.

Oakes also ordered that the painting of De Tencin, then housed at the *Forfantone*, be accorded a prominent place in the new library's main hall. Unfortunately, there seems to have been a mix-up of sorts, because the figure of the portrait said to be De Tencin is actually Fra Count Giovanni d'Herbenstein. Yet, notwithstanding the lack of the great benefactor's likeness, Jean Louis Guerin de Tencin's memory will always be preserved as the founder of the National Library of Malta.