

SOCIETY AND PEOPLE

Appreciations

John J. Cremona: a chief justice and poet (1918-2020)

The political history of the Maltese islands will tell us that John Cremona (1918-2020) is an eminent figure that has left his mark on the major chronicled events of the 20th century. For John Cremona (or J. J. Cremona) is, for a large section of the population, better known for his distinguished legal profession that unfolds a long list of accomplishments at the national and international levels, including Chief Justice of Malta and vice-president of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

But there is another side to this personality. And that is poetry. For Cremona has earned recognition as much for his legal achievement as for the accomplishment of his poetic career. At an early age, when he was fifteen, he started writing poetry and he kept on writing poetry till his death on December 24, 2020 when he was close to his 103rd birthday. So if legal history will reveal his greatness as a public figure, literary criticism will explain him as a sensitive human being and this has already been done by Professor Rev. Peter Serracino Inglott (1936-2012).

Cremona's poetic career can be subdivided neatly into three phases. In the Italian phase, before the war, he wrote poems in Italian and twice won prizes in Italy's *Mostra Nazionale di Poesia Contemporanea* (1937-38); he published *Eliotropi* (1937) a book of poems in Italian. About this first phase, Peter Serracino Inglott said that John Cremona had already assimilated the technical revolution of the modern age without sacrificing the musicality that was always the basis of traditional verse and without engaging in exercises that were purely cerebral (see the introduction to *Mas-Sebh Ghasafar*).

During the English phase, spanning the last six decades of the 20th century, he wrote poetry in English. He represented Malta in Common-

wealth anthologies (1967, 1968) and published several poems in English and American journals. He was for many years vice-president of the International Poetry Society.

His publications of English poems are *Songbook of the South* (1940) and *Malta Malta* (1992). Examining this phase, Serracino Inglott unambiguously declared that he regards Cremona "as the Maltese poet who has written most successfully in English" (see the introduction to *Malta Malta*). It is interesting to note that some of his English poems were read in the public by prominent personalities like the English poet laureate Cecil Day-Lewis (1969) and Queen Elizabeth II (1992).

The third phase is the Maltese one; and in the first two decades of the 21st century he still wrote in Maltese till his death. His publications of Maltese poetry include *Mas-Sebh Ghasafar* (2004), *Ekwinozju* (2006, here I shall refer to some of the poems from this book), *Poesie, Poems, Poeziji* (2009, an anthology of his collected poems in the three languages), *Il-Kantiku tax-Xagħra* (2012), and *Poeziji* (2018). It seems that Serracino Inglott had often remarked to Cremona that he should write poetry in Maltese. But Cremona had to wait for a profound intimate moment that followed the death of his dear wife to do so.

Modern poetry

Peter Serracino Inglott, who analysed in some detail Cremona's poetry, attributed the beginnings of modern poetry in Malta to Cremona after examining a 1933 short poem (*Mezzanotte*) by Cremona who wrote it in Italian. He specifically stated: "Kienet din - ghandi nahseb - l-ewwel poezija moderna li nkitbet minn Malti." (I believe, it was this poem the first ever modern poem written by a Maltese.) And then he calls him "*Il-missier tal-poezija moderna f'Malta*" (the father of modern poetry in Malta).

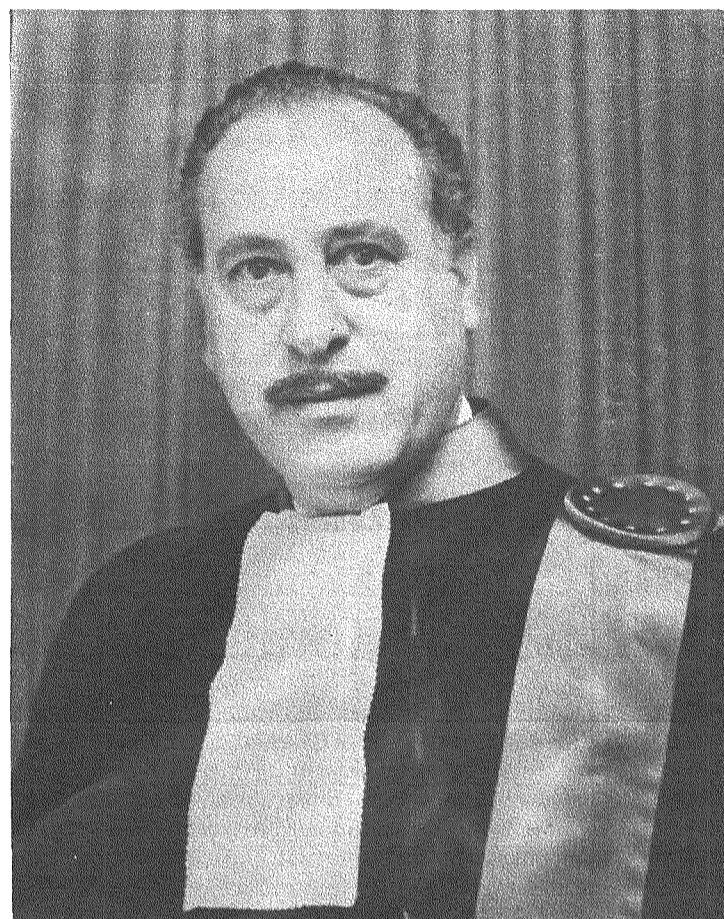
Modern poetry rests often on experience, instantaneity and particularity, and not much on abstractions. Cremona's poetry avoided abstraction and favoured life's particularity; and he often adopted free verse forms.

In the imagist fashion, Cremona did not talk about a sensory experience but opted to present it. *Wara Kedda, Salvu*, and *Ir-Ramla l-Hamra* (to mention but a few examples) follow the imagist method of promoting an image as the central core of the poem. Here Cremona sought clarity of expression through the employment of precise images engaged as basic units.

"He kept on writing poetry till his death on December 24, 2020"

The four-line *Wara Kedda* (After being upset/distressed) juxtaposed anger with motherhood. The central image is of the poet as an angry man meeting a delighted she-cat breastfeeding her kittens in the sun. The interpretation of this poem rests on the element "*b'xortija*" which posits a problem to the translator. If we construe this to mean "I was lucky to see the breastfeeding cat", Cremona's laconic lines turn negative energy into a positive and optimistic experience; so that human anger is dismissed at the sight of the caring animal. Whereas, if we were to interpret "*b'xortija*" in a sarcastic way ("lucky me!"), the meaning of the poem changes as it puts humanity in a ridiculous situation that says: "man is angry whereas the animal is pleased" - a situation that adds to man's unhappy condition.

Most of the time, Cremona talked about himself. His poetry is, therefore, full of personal feeling and has been called "*awtobiografija lirika*" (lyrical autobiography). Maybe "lyrical snatches of a self-portrait" fits much better because there is no continuous account



of a personality, nor is there any systematic presentation of Cremona's character.

The lyrical snatches (imbed, sometimes, with confession) create a montage in which each fragment or session is autonomous and professes no expectations. Reading the anthology as a whole, however, makes it appear as a sort of patchwork whose different experiences appear variegated but (paradoxically) coherent, even when we read poems that employ anachronistic juxtapositions like *Il-Ballata ta' Via Margutta, O Venezia Venezia*, and *Ittra lil Heimo Kremmayer*.

In general, his poetry - despite the fact that it is full of personal feeling - controls the warmth of personal commitment to a feeling and prefers coolness diffidently decorated with his descriptive power made manifest in very concise language. Emotional coolness keeps away from sentimentalism. But I feel there persisted in him a tinge of English romanticism, especially in the group of poems dedicated to Beatrice.

Charles Briffa

Among his many attributes, Prof. J.J. Cremona was instrumental in Malta having its own national honours. It had started during 1967 when the Confederation of Voluntary Civic Committees had suggested the establishment of the

National Medal of Merit. At that time only colonial awards were bestowed on Maltese citizens.

On being approached, Prof. Cremona immediately accepted to chair the selection committee and felt the need for a national award. In this regard, I was his right-hand man. The first award was made on September 21, 1968, which at that time was Malta's National Day. The award had a warm welcome and all newspapers gave it prominence. It was unfortunate that some Maltese were still tied up with the colonial mentality and caused much obstruction to such a national honour.

A change of government saw Dom Mintoff becoming the new prime minister. Prof. Cremona and I had number of meetings with Mintoff who was well aware of our efforts, but he felt that such an honour had to come from the state and eventually established the *Gieħ ir-Repubblika* awards. I know for certain that Prof. Cremona had helped Mintoff in the establishment of the official nation awards.

Prof. Cremona continued to take keen interest in the selection and bestowal of the awards which later on became known as the National Order of Merit and Prof. Cremona, quite rightly, was bestowed with the honour of Companion of the Order of Merit of the Maltese Republic.

Malta has lost one of its prime citizens who was always proud of being Maltese.

Frans H. Said