

# A TREASURY OF LANGUAGE

"A public library is the most democratic thing in the world. What can be found there has undone dictators and tyrants." –

Doris Lessing, author

It is hardly on the high street, you would have to know where to find it, but on the edge of a picturesque square, half way down Republic Street is the National Library of Malta, or Bibliotheca, as it is more widely known. Within its stunning, baroque rooms, reached by impressive staircases, is an incredible collection of books, etchings and archives. These date from as far back as 1555, when Grand Master Claude de la Sengle, with great foresight, declared that when a member of the Knights of St John died all his books were to be given to the Order's treasury.

Already the library's historical importance is obvious, but the story of its growth and survival adds even more interest and value for Valletta and the whole country.

Originally the collection included the Order's collection and 9,700 books purchased from Joaquín Fernández de Portocarrero by Louis Guérin de Tencin, the Bailiff Grand Cross of the Order, in 1760. This is intriguing.

Joaquín Fernández de Portocarrero y Mendoza was the 4th Marquis of Almenara, 9th Count of Palma del Río, a Grandee of Spain who served Charles VI, Holy Roman Emperor as Viceroy of Sicily and interim Viceroy of Naples, who became a priest in his 40s and was



Cardinal Bishop of Spain on his death, also in 1760.

But he was also a knight and ambassa-

dor of Malta and documented as having donated the 5,570 volumes of his book collection to the Order of Malta. So, one way or another, he was associated with the foundation of the Bibliotheca.

In 1761 Grand Master Claude de la Sengle opened *Il Forfantone*, as a public library comprising Portocarrero's collection, the library of Comm. Sainte-Jay, which was previously housed in the Conventual Church of St John's sacristy, the books donated by members of the Order and books from his own library.

Louis Guérin de Tencin was appointed librarian by Giovanni Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis, who also paid his salary. Sadly, De Tencin died five years later, still not having managed to secure enough funds needed to maintain the library.

The Bibliotheca Publica, was founded in 1776 by Grand Master Emmanuel de Rohan-Polduc. The *Forfantone* was too small for the job so in 1786 Stefano Itta, an architect from Poland was commissioned to design the new library to be built on the site where the Order's treasury was stored. He created an early neo-classical building with a symmetrical façade. A loggia supports the first floor, with the main doorway in the centre. Located over the doorway is a balustraded balcony, supported by Doric and Ionic columns and the monumental neo-classic staircase, spreading from the main entrance to the upper floors is a striking feature. Visitors are also impressed by the exquisite ceiling, with its rosettes carvings of figureheads. The building is listed on the 1925 Antiquities List and scheduled as a Grade 1 national monument.

The library was completed in 10 years, but the invasion by France, in 1798 caused it to remain empty for some time; it even served for a period as a club for Army and Navy officers. It was not till June 4, 1812, that it was formally opened by the English Civil Commissioner Sir Hildebrand Oakes.

Today, it would be hard on entering

the library's rooms not to be overwhelmed by an almost tangible feeling for the age and history of their contents, the associations with some of the greatest leaders, writers and rulers and the world-changing events with which they are connected.

Within these walls are an Egyptian papyrus, from 332-331 BC. With Malta's, particularly Valletta's, history in mind, the most notable piece is a Papal bull, an edict issued in 1113 by Pope Paschal II which recognises the establishment and independence and sovereignty of Order of St John. The Order's complete archives from the Middle Ages on to 1798 and the archives of the Treasury of the Order are there too.

Scholars will find the Malta University's archives, from when it was the Università of Mdina and the University of Valletta, between 1450 and 1818.

Newspapers and pamphlets going back to the time of the French occupation, and maps of local areas, fortified locations and sites of archaeological interest going back to the 1500s, along with those of the 20th century can be found.

And, as you would expect, there is obviously, an extensive collection of *Melitensia* dating as far back as you can imagine.

These precious manuscripts and books remain in the shelter and security of the library environment. But events are frequently organised to compliment the library's collection. Special exhibitions and projects to liaise with local libraries and communities throughout Malta are ongoing; participation in the Baroque Festival in January 2019 is already being publicised.

All these activities are designed to spread awareness of the importance of the Bibliotheca to as many people as possible, and to encourage an interest in the power that writings and books can have to improve and enrich our lives; often in ways that we may still not yet have discovered.

