

Ant. Zammit Gabarretta

Sir Thomas Maitland and Mgr. Ferdinando Mattei: A Controversy from a Contemporary Diary

Much has been written on Sir Thomas Maitland, appointed "Governor and Commander-in-Chief in and over the Island of Malta and its Dependencies as also of all the Forts and Garrisons erected and established or which shall be erected and established within the same" on 23 July, 1813 (1). Writing at a time when Britannia ruled the waves, Lord Frewen described him in the following high-sounding terms: "With one foot in Malta and the other in Corfù, King Tom stood out as the visible embodiment of a Pax Britannica. He bestrode the Mediterranean like a Colossus" (2). Dr Laferla, writing in the nineteen-thirties the history of a Crown Colony which he labeled *British Malta*, sees Maitland as "a capable, energetic public servant, zealously devoted to His Majesty's service, ever ready to sacrifice self on the altar of duty" (3). Dr Laferla, however, could not but admit in Maitland "one great defect — he was quarrelsome to the extreme and always spoiling for a fight. In later years, becoming savagely cynical, he gave way to such outbursts of scorn and temper that he was the most hated man of his time and often found himself in difficulties" (4).

It is not within the scope of this article to weigh and measure the many problems which were a headache to King Tom and to the Maltese, enjoying their newly acquired status of British subjects. These major problems are dealt with in all the history books of our Island. What intrigues me here is a controversy which existed in 1820 between Maitland and Bishop Mattei on the erection of a local Collegiate Church — which story is depicted in vivid details by Don Lorenzo Lanzon in his *Memorie Diverse*, a contemporary manuscript diary, written in Italian and kept in the Capitular Archives in Vittoriosa.

Don Lorenzo Lanzon who lived in the first half of the last century was a distinguished member of the Maltese clergy. He was Provost of St Philip's Church in Vittoriosa and was one of the delegates of the clergy who presented the requests and claims of the Maltese people before the Royal Commission of 1836. He passed his spare time in gathering information about the history of the Diocese of Malta and in so doing, he compiled eight large volumes, which he named *Memorie Diverse* and which he subsequently donated to the Chapter of Vittoriosa (5). Notwithstanding the damage suffered in the last World War, when the Chapter Hall of Vittoriosa was razed to the ground on 16 January, 1941, the Lanzon manuscripts have survived with only minor losses (6). It is

in the second part of volume eight of this collection, that Don Lorenzo puts on record the objections which Thomas Maitland brought forward to prevent the implementation of the Papal Bulls issued on 15 June, 1820 for the erection of a Collegiate Church in Vittoriosa. Lanzon could well go into all the details of the whole matter because he was the person delegated by the Vittoriosa clergy to bring the affair to a successful end.

The first difficulties were met with on 24 July, 1820. Lanzon had just received the original Papal Bulls from Rome and consequently the clergy of Vittoriosa deemed it fit to send two delegates to the British Governor in Malta to inform him of the happy event. Great must have been their surprise, when the Governor's Secretary — Maitland was, as usual, away from Malta — asked the two delegates, Don Vincenzo Ebejer and Don Giovan Battista Debono, whether they had informed Government previous to their submitting their request to the Holy See. He seemed greatly upset by their answer in the negative and abruptly told them to return the following day to speak to the Lieutenant Governor (7).

That same day, Don Lorenzo Lanzon explained the unpleasant situation to the Bishop's Vicar. It had been the opinion of Bishop Mattei and his Vicar not to contact government at all at that stage. It would have sufficed to inform Government only a few days previous to the installation of the members of the new Chapter. The Vicar, consequently, disapproved of the step which had been taken by the clergy of Vittoriosa. They had now no alternative but to speak to the Lieutenant Governor and try to convince him that the erection of a new Collegiate Church entailed no prejudice whatsoever to the Civil Authorities. They had to make it clear that they had informed Government merely to show their good will and respect towards constituted authority in the Island (8).

Lanzon had also a long interview with Vincenzo Mamo, Assistant Secretary to Government. He stated that the clergy of Vittoriosa had acted with all due respect towards the Government and had lost no time to inform the latter of the favour bestowed upon them by the Holy See. Vincenzo Mamo, however, claimed that His Eminence Ercole Consalvi, Cardinal Secretary of State, had given assurances that the Holy See would inform the local government before granting any ecclesiastical distinction to the Maltese (9). To what extent was Vincenzo Mamo correct in his assertions? (10) Lanzon's Diary records only the heated discussion that took place in the afternoon of 24 July, 1820 between him and the Assistant Secretary, who heard everything which Lanzon had to say but was not in a position to indicate a way out of the impasse.

On the morning of 25 July, Don Vincenzo Ebejer, Don Giovan Battista Debono and Don Lorenzo Lanzon presented themselves at the Governor's Palace to speak to the Lieutenant Governor as they had been directed to do by the Secretary on the previous day. The Lieutenant Governor, however, had

no time to speak to them. He sent an officer telling them to suspend everything until the Governor's return to Malta. For Lanzon, who had been toiling hard for long months to see the matter of the newly erected Collegiate Church happily concluded, this abrupt order was indeed a heavy blow! He wrote down in his *Memorie*: “[*Il Signor Luogotenente Generale*] senza punto ascoltarci, mandò a dire di sospendere il possesso, ed aspettare l'arrivo del Signor Governatore. L'annunzio funesto fu un fulmine, che poco mancò non mi facesse tramortire. Caddi in fatti seduto su di una sedia, che mi stava alle spalle, e per qualche tempo non ho potuto rialzarmi per il più forte turbamento, da cui mi sentii tutto sconcertato. Rinvenni alla fine, ed a stento ritornai a casa” (11).

Great was the consternation in the Diocese when the news spread that the British Government in Malta had suspended the implementation of the Papal Bulls. All sorts of misgivings filled the mind of both clergy and laity: “*non già solo per motivo della sospensione della nostra Bolla, ma vie maggiormente per i ceppi, che si vedevano miseramente preparati alla Chiesa di Malta, se il Governo incominciasse ad introdurre tali pretensioni, ed impedire l'esecuzione delle Bolle Pontificie*” (12). As often happens in similar circumstances, all sorts of incredible stories began to go round. Some went too far and began to suspect that two members of the Cathedral Chapter, Canon Salvatore Susano and Canon Salvatore Lanzon, were putting spokes in the wheel in an attempt to hinder the establishment of a Collegiate Church in Vittoriosa (13).

The truth was that neither the Lieutenant Governor nor his Secretary dared to shoulder any responsibility while the Governor was away. The dictatorial figure of Thomas Maitland loomed over the colony from afar, and no one dared to take any positive action.

It is in this context that Don Lorenzo Lanzon gives the following portrait of Thomas Maitland, “Governor of these Islands and of those of Corfù where he loved to stay for the greater part of the year, and only came here once or twice a year, for a few days..... I find it necessary to make a reference to the rather brutal character of this man. He was Scotch by birth and well advanced in years. Arrogance and unlimited pride predominated in him. He looked down with contempt upon everyone without any exception: even the most qualified persons could not escape his scorn. He despised the Maltese and the English alike — whatever their rank. He had not one friend. With his oppression, with his heavy, outrageous taxes he pushed the whole population to the brink of poverty. He so restricted the number of officers employed with Government that even the day-to-day business could hardly be carried out. He dismissed from service a very large number of employees and reduced them to poverty: not even one of these succeeded in obtaining some kind of appointment — at least for charity's sake. Never were the streets of this Island so crammed with beggars and thieves. He knew not how to show any kindness to anyone, except to thieves condemned to prison. For every time he returned to Malta, as a sign

of his benevolence, as he used to put it, he would let some fifty of them free to return to their former job. He was feared by everyone, and by everyone he was hated. He had a troubled, sourish appearance; blood-red, restless eyes and a squinting, sinister look which clearly showed the dark, devilish spirit which inhabited that middle-sized body of his! He was, however, greatly upheld at the Court of London on account of his brother who occupied one of the key positions" (14).

No high hopes deluded the four delegates of the Vittoriosa clergy who, on 2 September, 1820, the day following Maitland's return to Malta, presented themselves at the Palace and asked for an audience. Lanson makes here a bitter comment: "*Se nessuno mai ebbe udienza da quel Signor Governatore privo di ogni Religione e nemico implacabile della nostra, si figuri se l'ottennero quei Signori Deputati Ecclesiastici*" (15). In fact, the Parish Priest Salvatore Fenech, and the three other delegates Don Giuseppe Xerri, Don Vincenzo Ebejer and Don Giovan Battista Debono were not granted the opportunity to speak to the British Governor. They were kept for hours in the waiting room, every time they tried to get an audience. On 5 September, the Governor sent an officer to tell them to draw up a memorandum concerning the whole affair, in which they stated what they desired and to submit it to the Governor together with the Papal Bulls which they had received from the Holy See. After consulting the Bishop and his Vicar General, they did so without delay.

On 17 September, Maitland sent the following letter to the Bishop of Malta. The style in which it was written, even when one takes into consideration the temperament of the writer, was far from cordial:

La Valletta dal Palazzo

a dì 17 Settembre 1820

Ill.mo e Rev.mo Signore,

Ieri si presentarono in Palazzo alcuni Preti portando seco una Bolla del Santo Padre sul soggetto di qualche cosa relativa ad una delle Chiese Cattoliche di questa Diocesi.

Confesso candidamente di non essere stato poco sorpreso dopo il mio arrivo in quest'Isola di non aver avuto l'onore di vederla, o di sentire cosa alcuna da parte sua. Avrei dovuto ciò aspettare per comune decenza, e quantunque io possa al certo passar sopra questa parte del soggetto, perchè mi è meramente personale, pure io non posso ammettere per un sol momento, che si seguiti una linea di condotta dai membri della Chiesa sotto i di lei ordini, che a me sembra non solo contraria ad ogni principio di vero decoro, e riguardo, ma altresì tendente a degradare essenzialmente agli occhi del Pubblico la situazione ed il carattere del Rappresentante di Sua Maestà in queste Possessioni.

Se Sua Santità crede giusto di estendere qualche marca di suo favore a degl'Individui in quest'Isola la comunicazione su tale soggetto deve natural-

mente farmisi per mezzo del Capo della Chiesa nella stessa Isola. Ed io senza dubbio aspetto ed ho un diritto di aspettare, che quel Capo personalmente o se in stato di malattia per iscritto comunichi meco sul soggetto, e non già far venire al mio palazzo ufficiali inferiori della Chiesa, di cui io non posso avere alcuna conoscenza, e coi quali non devo trattare alcun affare.

La conseguenza di questa condotta di V.S. Ill.ma e R.ma è stata che malgrado qualunque mia disposizione, mi è per fin impossibile di prendere in considerazione il soggetto portato dinanzi a me, in un modo così indecoroso, ed a mio senso così improprio. Ed a questo riguardo, senza perdita di tempo, avanderò la mia lagnanza al Cardinale Consalvi, per informazione di Sua Santità.

Ho l'onore di essere etc.

T. Maitland (16)

In this letter, there is no attempt to cover the strained relations that existed at the time between the Governor and Bishop Mattei. Maitland was not the man to throw oil on troubled waters. After a three weeks stay in Malta, on 22 September, he again left the Island. Before leaving, he wrote a second letter, couched in even stronger terms, addressed to Bishop Mattei "*da essergli spedita un' ora dopo la sua partenza*" (17). King Tom and Bishop Mattei were on no friendly terms.

This unpleasant situation was due to several causes which are treated at length in the history books of the period. What seriously troubled Lanzon was the fact that Bishop Mattei showed no desire to meet Maitland whenever the latter happened to be in Malta. As the writer of the *Memorie Diverse* vividly put it: "*Mons.r Vescovo..... aveva del ribrezzo presentarsi avanti il Signor Governatore*" (18). So much so that the Bishop feigned a "diplomatic illness" everytime that the Governor came back to Malta from Corfù to exempt himself from the unpleasant duty of having to present his compliments (19).

Lanzon mentions in his *Memories* a fact which, according to him, was one of the causes that brought about his unhappy rift between the Governor and Bishop Mattei. In 1817, the Bishop of Malta had obtained from the Holy See the Titular Bishopric of Larada for Mgr. Publio Maria de' Conti Sant, Canon of the Cathedral Chapter, without informing the Governor. The latter was greatly displeased. Maitland, in fact, made an attempt to hinder the implementation of the Papal Bulls in favour of Bishop Sant, who was, however, consecrated on 28 June 1818. He was, moreover, determined to obtain an Archbishopric for Canon Giuseppe Bartolomeo Xerri, the Archdeacon of the Cathedral who fully enjoyed the favours of the British Governor (20). Canon Xerri was one of the Bishop's Vicars General, but Mgr. Mattei was not at all happy with him. The Bishop of Malta justly feared that the Governor would procure for his friend from the Holy See some sort of ecclesiastical control over the affairs of the

Maltese Diocese. When in 1818, the British Government instituted the Order of St Michael and St George, Mgr. Xerri accepted to be nominated one of its Prelates — a dignity which Mgr. Mattei had refused. *“S’approfittò Mons. Vescovo di questa circostanza per avanzare contro di lui [Mons. Xerri] un’ accusa alla S. Sede, per essersi con giuramento solenne collegato coi Protestanti”* (21). As a result, the Vatican viewed the prelacy with disfavour and Mons. Xerri had to resign (22).

It was indeed unfortunate for the Vittoriosa clergy that the question of the new Collegiate Church got mixed up between these conflicting parties. The Governor's stay out of the Island was longer than expected. But Lanzon did not stay passively waiting the turn of events. On 24 September, 1820 in a letter addressed to His Eminence Cardinal Giulio Gabrielli, Pro Datario of His Holiness, he drew up an exposition of the whole situation, and mentioned the objections put forward by the British Government in Malta who suspended the implementation of the Papal Bulls. *“Ma con sommo raccapriccio si è ritrovato, che il Governo era altamente offeso, perchè si fecero lecito supplicare alla Santa Sede tale grazia senza parteciparlo prima affatto di avanzare ogni ricorso, dicendo che l’Em.o Signor Cardinale Segretario di Stato aveva con sua lettera assicurato questo Governo, che non sarebbe Sua Beatitudine per concedere veruna simile grazia senza prima parteciparlo. Nulla giovò il rispondere, che s’ignorava affatto quella lettera, e che sembrò anzi non essere conveniente partecipare il Governo di una supplica, che potrebbe non avere il suo effetto. Onde fu loro ordinato di aspettare l’arrivo del Signor Governatore, ed intanto sospendere l’esecuzione delle Bolle* (23).

On 24 March, 1821 he prepared a lengthy memorandum addressed to Sir Richard Plasket, Chief Secretary to Government (24). Nor was he slow to consult prominent, influential persons whose word carried weight with the British Government in Malta. He spoke to Mgr. Bartolomeo Xerri and to Judge Dr. Giuseppe Nicolò Zammit (25). The latter greatly enjoyed the favours of the British Government and had been nominated Knight Commander of the Order of Saint Michael and Saint George (26).

They both promised to help him. But it was not before 18 September, 1821, when Maitland returned to Malta after having paid a visit to London, that Archdeacon Xerri assured Lanzon that the Governor no longer objected to the implementation of the Papal Bulls: *“in seguito ad un lungo ragionamento tenuto sul nostro affare col Signor Governatore, questi inclinato alle sue preghiere, condiscese a permettere l’esecuzione della nostra Bolla”* (27).

That same morning, Lanzon went to present his compliments to Bishop Mattei as it happened to be the anniversary of the latter's promotion from the titular Bishopric of Paphos to the See of Malta (28). As there were many people

in the Episcopal Palace, Lanzon had no opportunity to speak privately to the Bishop: "*Ma quando mi accostai a baciargli la mano, strinse la mia con trasporto di gioia, e tosto mi disse: State allegramente, che tutto è terminato. Venite domani mattina*" (29).

Don Lorenzo Lanzon did not sleep that night. He counted the long, endless hours one by one. Next morning he went to Mgr. Mattei who gave him the good news that finally the Governor had given his consent to the implementation of the Papal Bulls in favour of the Vittoriosa Collegiate Church (30). What had brought about this change in King Tom? Had he received some new directives from higher quarters when he was in London? Did he let himself be persuaded, as Mgr. Xerri claimed, by the Archdeacon whom he normally consulted on matters concerning the Maltese diocese? Or did any event happen, since he left Malta in September 1820, which made him change his attitude?

In his *Memorie*, Lanzon states that this happy turn of events was due to the fact that Bishop Mattei desisted from obstructing the nomination of Mgr. Xerri to an archbishopric as the British Governor had desired since 1817, when Mgr. Sant had been promoted to the Titular Bishopric of Larada (31). In fact, on 27 June, 1821, His Holiness Pius VII nominated Mgr. Giuseppe Bartolomeo Xerri Metropolitan Archbishop of Tiane (32). On Maitland's return to Malta after a long absence, Mgr. Mattei had a meeting with him on 17 September, 1821 and they came to an agreement on two points. Mgr. Mattei was first to consecrate Mgr. Xerri and later hold the formal installation of the members of the Chapter of the Vittoriosa Collegiate Church. "*Da ciò rilevai,*" comments Lanzon in his *Memorie*, "*che la vera ragione per la quale il Signor Governatore non aveva aderito all'esecuzione delle Bolle era perchè Mons. Vescovo si opponeva a frastornare la promozione del pre nominato Signor Arcidiacono al Vescovato titolare di Tiane. Onde desistendo ambedue dalle vicendevoli opposizioni, doveva prima Mons. Vescovo compiacere al Signor Governatore, ed in seguito questi secondare i desideri di Mons. Vescovo*" (33).

Notwithstanding this happy agreement, Mgr. Giuseppe Bartolomeo Xerri was not consecrated Archbishop of Tiane by the Bishop of Malta. This was due to the fact that only a few weeks after Maitland's return to Malta, Mgr. Xerri died at his residence in Valletta, on 28 November, 1821, without receiving episcopal consecration (34). The installation of the members of the Vittoriosa Chapter was held on 31 December of that same year. Under the circumstances, however, Mgr. Mattei prudently decided not to go personally to Vittoriosa on that occasion and delegated in his stead Canon Simeone Biagio, Dean of the Cathedral Chapter (35), who installed the eighteen members of the new Collegiate Chapter in accordance with the contents of the Papal Bulls issued by Pope Pius VII over a year and a half previously.

1. A. V. Laferla, *British Malta*, Malta 1976, 1 p.79.
2. W. Frewen, *Sir Thomas Mailland*, London 1897, p.24.
3. A. V. Laferla, *op.cit.*, p.78
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Il Portafoglio*, 7 luglio 1858, n.9, p.74. A. Ferris, *Descrizione storica delle chiese di Malta e Gozo*, Malta 1866, pp.282-283.
6. The Lanson Manuscripts kept in the Capitular Archives of Vittoriosa have been recently repaired and rebound. They consist of two volumes entitled *Diario ragionato di tutte le feste*, and the originally eight (recently rebound, for practical purposes, in ten) volumes with the title *Memorie Diverse*.
7. Capitular Archives Vittoriosa, *Memorie Diverse*, VIII,ii,p.758.
8. *Ibid.* 9. *Ibid.*, p.759.
10. During a talk which Lanson had with the Bishop of Malta, on 27 July, 1820 at the latter's summer residence in Casal Lia, Mgr Mattei also referred to this letter. *Memorie Diverse*, VIII, ii, p.761.
11. Cap. Arch. Vitt., *Memorie Diverse*, VIII, ii, p.760.
12. *Ibid.*
13. When Don Lorenzo Lanson paid the above-mentioned visit to Bishop Mattei at Casal Lia, the latter mentioned the great opposition which the Canon Precentor of the Cathedral, Salvatore Susano, and Canon Salvatore Lanson were putting up against the establishment of the Vittoriosa Collegiate Church. *Ibid.*, p.761.
14. *Ibid.*, p.771. 15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p.772. 17. *Ibid.*, p.775.
18. *Ibid.*, p.772. 19. *Ibid.*, p.776.
20. *Ibid.* 21. *Ibid.*
22. A. Bonnici, *History of the Church in Malta*, Malta 1975, III, p.227.
23. Cap. Arch. Vitt., *Memorie Diverse*, VIII, ii, p.777.
24. *Ibid.*, p.949-960. 25. *Ibid.*, pp 775-776.
26. A. V. Laferla, *op.cit.*, p.104.
27. Cap. Arch. Vitt., *Memorie Diverse*, VIII, ii, p.801.
28. *Ibid.*, p.801. A. Ferris, *Storia Ecclesiastica di Malta*, Malta 1877, p.404.
29. Cap. Arch. Vitt., *Memorie Diverse*, VIII, ii, p.801.
30. *Ibid.*, p.801. 31. *Ibid.*
32. A. Ferris, *op. cit.*, p.416.
33. Cap. Arch. Vitt., *Memorie Diverse*, VIII, ii, p.801.
34. A. Ferris, *op. cit.*, p.416.
35. Cap. Arch. Vitt., *Diario Lanson*, II, p.110.