

BOOK REVIEWS

Buttigieg A., *Grajjiet il-Qala*, Malta 1981, pp. 103

This book purports to present to the reader a short history of the Gozitan village of Qala. On the whole, the work is very readable and the sincerity of the author when embarking on this venture is beyond question. However, the title should have indicated that the contents, in reality, are no more than excerpts from Qala's history and not, as may have been expected, a full account, chronological or otherwise.

The end result is a rather disjointed account of various aspects of what may be termed events in the history of the village. There is no real cohesion between the 32 chapters, most of which are rather short and should have really been sub-divisions of longer chapters. No less than 11 chapters deal directly or indirectly with the Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception on the outskirts of Qala, which makes the work rather lop-sided. There is a dearth of material concerning the social history of the village and though, admittedly, the world of such villages in the past revolved round their churches, this was certainly not to the complete exclusion of other considerations.

One must here note that writing with a parochial bias is something to be avoided, particularly so when the

writer happens to hail from the same town or village he is writing about. Probably unconsciously, such a bias in this work does exist particularly in Chapter XVIII when the author seems to be trying to fix Qala's first elevation to parochial status as far back as possible. Also, statements stating that there are more documents (presumably to prove his point) but that he is not quoting them because he believes he has proved his point (for example see p. 56) do not help to enhance an author's credibility or his reputation as a historian. All existing known facts are to be expounded in the proper writing of history and no self-respecting historian intermixes facts, traditions and legends. As is to be expected, no index is compiled.

Printing by San Gwakkinn Press of Birkirkara is passable but there should have been much better proof-reading, a fact which makes a mockery of the brief *errata-corrige* at the beginning. To be fair, Mr. Buttigieg does end his work by referring to the book as "my poor work" and hopes that it will serve to stimulate someone else to build on it and present a better account of his beloved native village. And that just about sums up the value of this book. It can be used as a useful beginning to the proper writing of this Gozitan village's history.

JOSEPH F. GRIMA

Dearden S., *A Nest of Corsairs*, London (Murray) 1976, pp. 331.

The sub-title of this book is "The Fighting Karamanlis of the Barbary Coast" and it aptly sums up what this book is about: the rule of the Karamanli family in Tripoli from 1711 to 1835. In 1711, Ahmed Karamanli (1711-1745) took over the reins of power in his hands by a coup and his descendant Ali was deposed by a similar Turkish coup a century and a quarter later, a sort of poetic justice. In the intervening years, the Regency of Tripoli was ruled by Mohammed (1745 - 54), Ali (1754 - 95), and Yusef (1795 - 1835).

On the whole, the subject — built on extensive published and less extensive unpublished material — is treated chronologically and the author gives a pleasing and very readable account of Karamanli rule which was a constant struggle against internal and external enemies, poverty, drought and disease. This dynasty had its own extravagant, princely court and an expensive army which could only be maintained on the income obtained from the plunder resulting from the *War of Corsairs* in the Mediterranean. Corsairing obviously brought Tripoli in conflict with the Western Maritime Powers, including Britain and France. Although Malta is not given any undue importance in this book, corsairing did bring Tripoli in conflict with our island home, as both were protagonists of the so-called *Holy War* in the Medi-

terranean. It is said that one should "know one's enemy" and, since Tripoli and Malta were enemies in the 18th century, lovers of Maltese history should take every opportunity to study the history of the peoples we were (or are) in contact with — be they friends or enemies — in order to extract a fuller appreciation and understanding of our own history. And this is precisely why I liked reading this book.

Moreover, one must note that the Libyans still retain something of the closed character existing at the times of the Karamanlis — when Libya was in fact really independent for the first time — and so this book may be said to have a contemporary interest for the study of the Libyan character.

JOSEPH F. GRIMA

Clissold S., *The Barbary Slaves*, London (Paul Elek) 1977, pp. 181.

A rather detailed and vivid account of Christian Slaves in Barbary is the subject of this book which subdivides its contents into areas embracing subjects such as Moors and Christians, the rise of the Barbary States, Corsairs and Captives, Life in the Bagnios, Escapes, Renegades, Ransoms, and English Slaves. It ends with the decline and extinction of the North African corsairing activity when French colonialist rule took over Algiers in 1830.

The book makes pleasant and very

informative reading. Mr. Clissold has here presented a study, spanning three centuries (c. 1500 - 1800), in which he traces the development of Christian slavery under Islam, particularly in Muslim Spain and its extension to the Barbary Regencies of North Africa. Quite vivid descriptions are given such as, to quote but some examples, the capture of slaves, their sale in the slave markets, life in the bagnios, some types of torture and attempts to escape.

One must, of course, point out that inhuman living conditions were not a prerogative of Christian slaves but were also inflicted on Muslim captives too. So, in a sense, this book helps the reader to understand the hard and harsh life of the times. Also, quite a number of Maltese slaves finished up in the North African bagnios and I noticed no less than seven references to our island in the index alone. Although the work is mainly built up on secondary sources, I think it does contribute towards the better understanding of slavery as a direct result of the *Holy War* in the Mediterranean, a situation so readily accepted by both sides and which was only brought to an end through the direct intervention of outsiders, so to speak.

On the whole, a book worth reading and having for the better understanding of the history of the Mediterranean littoral, of which Malta is an integral part.

JOSEPH F. GRIMA

Bonnici, Rev. Alexander, Mons. *Ġużeppi de Piro (1877 - 1933), Vol. I, Fundatur tas-Socjetà Missjunarja ta' San Pawl, Malta 1982, pp. 304 illus.*

The Missionary Society of St Paul is the only male Religious Order to be founded by a Maltese, the Rev. Mgr. Joseph de Piro. So far, very little has really been printed both about the beginnings of the Order and about its founder, a lacuna, I think, in the study of our islands' religious and social history. I write 'religious and social' because the philanthropic contribution given to our islands by this Order is only equalled by their religious and social work among Maltese migrants abroad. Happily, this gap is now being filled by Fr Alexander Bonnici OFM Conv with his two-volume biography of Mgr. De Piro, of which the book under review is the first half.

Let me say from the outset that at no time did I find the book tedious to read through even though it is written by a priest about another priest setting up a Society of Priests which ultimately published the finished work. This interest came not from the language used or any other stratagem but simply because of the logical way the narrative has been put together and the very obvious personal interest, sacrifice and effort which the author has put into this work. Father Bonnici is fast becoming a very good analytical biographer and this book is no mean companion to his biographies of *Dun Ġorġ Preca*

and *Frenċ tal-Għarb*, incidentally both religious themes too.

This first volume about Mgr. De Piro includes a short history of the noble De Piro family in Malta and its origins, the Monsignor's early life and the formation of his priestly vocation, the period covering his studies in Rome for the priesthood, his ill-health, and about 120 pages about his ideas to form a missionary society right up to its Diocesan approval and the state of the Society almost at the time of his death. Of course, de Piro did more than just found an Order, which is something notable and, by itself, a worthwhile project to which one can devote one's whole life. De Piro was also a social worker and it is this aspect which is the projected subject of the second volume. The volume under review deals mainly with the founding of the Society of St Paul, and it is a work which is meticulously set out and just as meticulously documented. Indeed, there is a wealth of documentation throughout the whole book.

Father Bonnici also tries to understand De Piro and I believe he has succeeded. I felt that I understood him too and could feel the difficulties and dilemmas he faced. His strong sense of duty and goodness are also amply demonstrated and shown to have really existed. Perhaps Fr. Bonnici's own priestly vocation, coupled with his historical training, have helped to make this understanding

possible and, just as important, has helped to put it through to the reader.

JOSEPH F. GRIMA

Galea J., *F'Gieħ il-Haqq*, Malta, (The Police Association) 1982, 170 pp.

A book which sets out to give us a history of capital crime in Malta during the 19th century but only succeeds in presenting a chronicle of such cases without even the semblance of analysis, neither deep nor superficial for that matter. A lot of hullabaloo was written about this book particularly in its foreword, hence its pretensions. For my money, impartial judgement has sadly found it lacking and it certainly does not do justice to its neat printing, very good presentation and good quality paper.

JOSEPH F. GRIMA

Tonna E., & Galea M., *L-Arċisqof Gonzi*.

Vol. I — Malta (Klabb Kotba Mal-
tin) 1981, pp. 181 illus.

Vol. II — Malta (Associated News
(M) Ltd) 1982, pp. 172 illus.

These two volumes cover the life of Archbishop Gonzi up till 1964. However, the material they contain was first approved by Archbishop Gonzi himself which means, for me, that there might have been other unapproved material which had to be omitted. In other words, these books are a cross-breed between biography and autobiography containing the ac-

ceptable parts but omitting the controversial whys and wherefores.

To be fair, the books do present some good descriptions of ceremonial of days now gone by but these certainly do not serve to help the reader one iota to make up his mind on how history may eventually judge Archbishop Gonzi. His life has spanned a great number of years and he was witnessed and been a protagonist in a great many profound changes — for better and for worse — in this island of ours. To mention but two instances, Archbishop Gonzi was a main protagonist in the two politico-religious questions of the 1930's and 1960's. Yet his part in them is simply recounted in a rather dry way as if they were run-of-the-mill events.

And it is exactly in this respect that these two volumes fail, for they do not, even remotely, try to analyse the important part which Archbishop Gonzi played in the moulding of present-day Malta. Consciously or unconsciously, we are simply presented with some facts and nothing else. In fact, these two volumes may be termed as simple chronicles, sometimes jumbled-up, fit only to be deemed a starting point towards a future, proper writing of the life and times of one of Malta's most important 20th century personages. And, judging from these two volumes, we are in for another equally uninspired final book when it is published, presumably after the contents

have been approved. I sincerely believe that the writing and publication of this biography was premature.

JOSEPH F. GRIMA

Mallia, Rev. Filipp, *L-Isqof li habbu kulhadd*, Malta (Lux Press) 1982, pp. xi 303.

This is a biography of Mgr. Angelo Portelli, Titular Bishop of Selinonte, a Dominican prelate who was a credit to his family, his Order and his country.

Fr. Mallia, himself also a Dominican, presents us with a very readable account of Mgr. Portelli's life, literally from the cradle to the grave. We are given a pen-portrait of the Monsignor's early life, through to his novitiate, his academic life, his parish work and, more intensively, his sixteen years as a prelate including his years as an Auxiliary Bishop, Apostolic Administrator and Vicar-General.

The whole work is extensively annotated and is certainly not just a biography written by an enthusiastic admirer. Fr. Mallia's very good book about the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament of St Dominic's parish of Valletta quickly springs to mind and this biography certainly does not detract from the reputation the author gained from his first work. Two things in common to both books are the painstaking research and the clear and very readable style in which they are both written.

Needless to say, the author's personal admiration for Mgr. Portelli is present throughout the book but one must also add that the prelate himself evoked admiration by the way he lived and tried to help others at all times including the 1919 riots. And I must say that his inherent goodness is ably brought out and presented to the reader. What are not just as clearly drawn out, perhaps, are the intricacies surrounding curia work and appointments though this may not be the author's fault. Certainly, a book worth reading.

JOSEPH F. GRIMA

Charles Galea Scannura: *Tagħrif Storiku Dwar il-Knisja Parrokkjali ta' Bormla*, 1983, 35 pp. illus.

In 1949, the late Canon Joseph Cassar published the first history of the parish church of Cospicua entitled "Żvilupp tal-Qima lejn Marija Verġni Immakulata f'Bormla." Now after years of painstaking research in various archives, C. Galea Scannura, has given us another publication on the same subject.

The book is a concise history of the parish church, with information about the erection of the parish of Cospicua, which according to the author was probably in 1586, and not in 1584 as was until recently assert-

ed, and the parish church from its initial stages till the present structure which was consecrated in 1732.

There are also interesting chapters on the confraternities set up in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the crucifix which came from Candia, the statue of the Immaculate Conception and other salient points of the history of the parish, such as its elevation to the status of collegiate in 1822, and the solemn crowning of the titular altar piece donated by the poet Canon Ludovico Mifsud Tommasi, by the Papal legate Cardinal Ferrata in June 1905.

For the author, born and bred in Cospicua, this publication was a labour of love. The information it contains is interesting and the book has several illustrations, some of which are rare. It is however to be regretted that, due to lack of space, the author was not given the opportunity to publish the references pertaining to each chapter, and he was only able to publish them in generalized form at the end of the book. However, notwithstanding this shortcoming, the book should make interesting reading, and is without doubt a welcome addition to our ever expanding "Melitensia".

WINSTON LAWRENCE ZAMMIT