

Book review

Sapienza, Anthony F. *Books by Maltese Jesuits: a bibliography based on a special collection (SJM) at John XXIII Library*. Valletta: John XXIII Library, 2002. x, 74 p.

The first time I met Fr Tony, as he was invariably called by his colleagues, was in the Library of the old University building in Valletta in the Spring of 1967, close to thirty-six years ago. He had then recently returned to Malta from the United States as one of a mere handful of rare qualified librarians, whilst I was the most recent recruit to the then tiny library staff. It was a time when we were soon due to embark on the university library's migration to the new, bare campus in the wilds of Tal-Qroqq.

I was of course still unaware of how much there was to learn, and how much he was willing to teach, both formally in courses, but particularly through the apprenticeship that I was to benefit from when he set up the library's reference department on the Msida campus during the 1967-68 academic year.

Under the direction of Dr Paul Xuereb, the University Librarian, assisted by the late Josie Montalto, his deputy, the library physically expanded beyond the wildest dreams of the Valletta years, and Fr Sapienza, as reference librarian, initiated a tradition of service that was unrivalled anywhere in Malta. During that first freezing winter at Tal-Qroqq, and as his assistant in subsequent years, I was destined to be a direct beneficiary of his wide-ranging knowledge, his impeccable methodology, and his benevolent influence which included teaching by indirect but lasting example.

To anyone who knows him it comes as no surprise that Fr Sapienza is capable of building a specialised collection in an unsung effort, spanning decades of dedicated searching and rescuing what are often little-known, obscure, hard to find, and – to the untrained eye – seemingly unrelated items. This is the story, of course, of the unique John XXIII Memorial Library at Xavier House in Valletta, which he has headed since the 1960s and, in microcosm, of the Maltese *Jesuitica* collection which is the subject of this review.

Purposefully collocated into a meaningful collection individual items thus merge into a discernible design, and unexpectedly constitute a whole certainly bigger than the sum of its parts – a whole whose research potential begins to make sense only with the hindsight now provided by the original "architect" of that collection. This is but one of the valuable competencies possessed by trained and well-qualified librarians, and Fr Sapienza is undoubtedly master of many of them. Another of which he is master is the underestimated art of bibliography which enhances areas of knowledge with structure, discipline, order and retrievability.

A printed bibliography may no doubt suffer from limited search capabilities when compared to electronic databases, but – especially if it is not too extensive – it enjoys the advantages of unhurried browsing, and the tactile familiarity of the printed page where individual memory patiently interfaces with individual spaces on the

printed text. Sapienza understands and makes best use of the print medium, and endows each listed item with the necessary detail that turns the bibliographical description into a surrogate of the document even before researchers have set eyes on the original.

The work under review lists a little under 500 titles of works produced by Maltese Jesuits, including those who were Jesuits at the time of writing, but who subsequently left the Society. The parameters determining inclusion are well defined in a concise but informative foreword, and we find that although the majority of documents are in the 'home' languages of Maltese and English, accompanied by Italian, and other familiar languages, there are also items in seemingly exotic languages such as Amharic and Santali.

Apart from theology and philosophy Jesuits are expected to have studied and qualified in other areas of knowledge where many of them have been known to excel. In addition to its stated purpose this listing of Maltese Jesuitica can thus additionally be read as a general bibliography pertaining to many subjects - geography, education, poetry, economics, sociology, etc. - much in the way that a national bibliography of a country lists items about all subjects, even if ultimately restricted by the parameter of 'national'.

Books by Maltese Jesuits is essentially a listing of books, with periodical articles being generally excluded from its scope. Chapters written by Maltese Jesuits in co-authored books are, however, also listed, as are, sensibly, relevant dissertations held by John XXIII Library, the parent collection.

The present work is Fr Sapienza's latest contribution, produced not without the many difficulties that beset the work of compilation. Researchers in Melitensia and Maltese Studies owe him a debt of gratitude for his singular contribution to the development of bibliographical tools to aid research in this country, and for his being an inspiration to others. His pioneering *Checklist of Maltese Periodicals and Newspapers*¹ remains a landmark in bibliographical enterprise, as does his early contribution to the co-operative development of the *Malta National Bibliography*² What can be justifiably seen as a vindication of the bibliographer's toil is that both have now become standard search apparatus for anybody embarking on serious study and research about Malta.

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1. Sapienza, A. F. *A checklist of Maltese periodicals and newspapers in the National Library of Malta (formerly Royal Malta Library) and the University of Malta Library*. Msida: Malta University Press, 1977. This was supplemented in a separate publication: Camilleri, N. & Petrocochino, R. *Supplement to "A checklist of Maltese periodicals and newspapers" covering the years 1974-1989*. Msida: Malta University Publications, 1990.
2. *Bibljografija nazzjonali ta' Malta - Malta national bibliography 1983-*. Valletta: National Library of Malta, 1984- .