

## Book reviews

**Thomas Freller, *Verses and Visions. The Maltese Islands in World Literature*  
Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta 2008.**

**pp. xv + 412, illustrations, bibliography, index of persons, index of places.  
ISBN 978-99932-7-192-5**

The author has taken on a very ambitious task, examining scores of books where Malta is mentioned, and has produced a useful collection of quotations from texts most of which are unknown to the average reader. However, this book is not an anthology, nor is it limited to verse or visions. Most passages are in prose and belong to the documentary genre, such as travellers' diaries, rather than (to) literary fiction, and as a result *Impressions* would have been more apt than *Visions*. Not surprisingly, apart from the few known references to Malta in classical works by Greek and Latin authors, the majority are taken from publications in Italian, Spanish, German and English. This approach is reflected in the orderly division of the book into seven chapters, which focus on (1) the Classical Period and the Middle Ages, (2) Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama, (3) the French Baroque and the Enlightenment, (4) Spanish and Italian literature, (5) the German authors, (6) the British novelists and (7) the French novelists of the 19th century.

Freller's feat is the result of a very painstaking exercise, and this is evidenced by the bibliography which runs on for forty pages and comprises some 1200 titles, and yet the author explains that it is not comprehensive and only lists works which were actually consulted by him. Freller steers clear of judgements on the aesthetic value of the works or passages he quotes and prefers a factual style of presentation, often providing a neat biographical profile of the author in question and a very brief summary or definition of the text. This is most useful when he mentions unknown, though not necessarily insignificant, writers. He also keeps the reader's interest alive by proffering anecdotes which give the book a human touch and adds his own perceptive comments that place the references or quotations in their proper historical context. This is evident when he speaks of British writers, underlining their bias against the Catholic Knights of St. John, and of the French writers who seem piqued by the fact that the British ousted Napoleon from Malta. Freller conveniently rounds up his views in the pithy and incisive 'Conclusion'.

On the whole foreign interest in Malta centred around a few topics, mainly the identification of Gozo with Calypso's island, St. Paul's shipwreck, admiration for the Knights' bulwark of Europe, and the history of the Order of St. John. The most important books about Malta are the well known historical accounts of Vertot 1726, Boisgelin 1804 and Miège 1840. Only a few works of fiction are dedicated to Malta either in full or in substantial parts because the island usually features simply in vague background sketches. There are accounts based on real-life figures, but in the intriguing stories of padre Ottomano, Romegas and Cagliostro truth and fiction

are skilfully intertwined. Travellers' descriptions tend to be more informative and accurate, though very subjective: famous people tell us how they arrived, often unintentionally just like Ulysses and Paul, or for an inevitable stopover on the way to or back from the East. For this reason most references are quite short. Some start with the Lazzaretto (rooms were spacious and splendid but not comfortable for Scott, but the place seemed awful to Thackeray), where visitors were kept for a whole month – quarantine was only reduced as a special favour to VIPs. Those who stayed for a day or two toured Valletta, and expressed admiration for St. John's church ("the most magnificent place I ever saw in my life" – Scott), with its paintings by Preti and Caravaggio ("a composition at once simple and terrible" – Denon) and the marble tombstones (although someone considered their designs too macabre). Erudite visitors who ventured as far as Mellieħa or crossed over to Gozo to inspect Calypso's cave were terribly disappointed to find a miserable hovel and a pigsty! Did they really expect it to have survived intact after two or three millennia?

Anecdotes add life to the detailed survey: a grand ball given in Scott's honour by the British garrison was attended by 400 people; Scott toured the harbour on a rowing boat and walked round the bastions of Valletta but only talked to British residents, except for Bishop Caruana; the Governor "had a shooting box for quails" at Marfa; in 1839 Nerval's friend Mery fell in love with a Maltese girl and wrote a poem calling Malta "a holy little island", "a rock of flowers", "a rock of flames" and mentioned "its thousand gardens". Disraeli disagreed and said that Malta was "little better than a rock", "like a quarry without a tree to be seen". He also disliked the priests' immunity but loved Valletta's splendour and compared Strada Reale to London's Regent Street. Vigny poetically described Valletta's "forts and bastions shining in the sun like pieces of newly-polished marble". In 1855 the Comte de Gobineau landed after midnight and was surprised by the hive of activity, music and singing .. he then discovered it was carnival. In 1849 Flaubert found Valletta a feast for the senses, "clean and picturesque, the women short and pale". Alexandre Dumas was actually an envoy of Garibaldi who came to lure Ruggero Settimo back to Sicily, an invitation the weak 82-year-old declined. The most lyrical description is Lamartine's who came in 1832 and compared Valletta to Seville, Cordova and Granada.

Some observations were less complimentary and focused on beggars, thieves, prostitution, duels and gambling. Political views by Protestants, liberals and republicans underlined the Order's despotism and denounced the ubiquitous horde of priests and perverted knights. As to the locals, an English chronicler contrived a pun inspired by the famous passage in *Acts*, saying that the Maltese were Barbarians in those days but showed kindness towards Paul and the other survivors, whereas in 1600 they were "such Barbarous people" that they would gladly throw Protestant visitors into the fire and burn them. William Lithgow wrote that in 1616 he witnessed a Spanish soldier and a Maltese boy being burnt to death for practising sodomy. Maxime Du Camp defined the locals as 'a mixture of the Italian lazzaroni and the

hot-blooded Arabs'. To Merimée the local prostitutes looked Phoenician. Dumas opined that only the beggars of Naples could vie with the 'bare-legged, yellow-skinned vultures who fasten upon unfortunate strangers the instant they touch the soil of Valletta' chanting the lingua franca refrain of *nix mangiari*. Jules Verne incorporated his views in a novel, *Mathias Sandorf* (1885), where his characters call Valletta's "the noisiest population in the world", admire the long Strada Reale that stretches from St. Elmo to Floriana and describe the murky Manderaggio, but Verne was struck by the Maltese women whose fair skin contrasted with their beautiful black hair. Comments on the language were obviously impressionistic.

Stereotyped references abound, usually borrowed from other sources, but there are several aborted literary intentions too. Apart from the well known cases of Schiller's *Die Maltheser* and Scott's *The Siege of Malta*, we read that Gérard de Nerval wanted to "write a big chapter on Malta" and that Anthony Trollope meant to write a book about Malta. Both failed. Vulpius' *Rinaldo Rinaldini* was a huge European success (35 foreign editions) but reference to Malta is really an anticlimax: his hero wanted to escape to the island but did not find a passage and met his tragic end. Goethe too was prevented from leaving Agrigento for Malta by unfavourable weather conditions, but we are told that "Malta fascinated the great German author throughout his whole lifetime", and yet he made just one brief reference to it in *Faust*.

The low aesthetic and informative value of the references to Malta in foreigners' writings in no way detracts from the merits of the compiler, who did an excellent job in gleaning paragraphs and sentences from the vast undergrowth of European literature. It is very sad to have to point out, however, that in this book form does not match content. Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti has accustomed us to very high standards in exhibitions and publications but this product is an unfortunate exception. In fact it seems to be an awkward translation from German, although there is no mention of a translator. Having enjoyed and appreciated other works by Thomas Freller, notably his excellent *Rise and Fall of Abate Giuseppe Vella*, his joint effort with Albert Friggieri on Hieronymus Megiser, his *Cavaliers' Tour and Knights, Corsairs and Slaves*, I never expected this book to be riddled with linguistic errors. These go beyond the quaint flavour of his mother tongue's interference, which tends to show mainly in syntax; after all we Maltese have certain peculiarities which characterize Maltese English, although our best writers succeed in avoiding them.

This work is marked by non standard word sequences like the unorthodox position of *also* (passim) and such phrases as: *which never was published; was hosted seven years of his nostos by ..; this was not caused least of all by ; quite some authors have written on; later the day; made him to one of the most popular; in Paris was performed a ballet; the most important aspect is that what is observed by..; if destiny not had given them*. There are elementary grammatical errors concerning the singular and the plural: *the questions crops up how far ...; it were*

mainly English authors who showed; writing was either ... or were ...; a lot more foodstuff; come to term with; a couple of month; one of the most general and striking feature of enlightenment thought; what make this travelogue so special; this side comments are the echoes. There is uncertainty in the use of *then* and *than* and of the possessive marker: *Sandys description; the islands culture; it's alleged role;* and some prepositions: *at the island*. Numerous expressions sound rather quaint: *the question is out if the island; still the question is out which of these sources were actually used; the answer is still out if the island; was no one less than the great poet [Byron]; works are signified by the effort; had a steadily running success; it is thought for sure; instrumentalised for thoughts of power and politics; between two high dead convent walls; the contents found entrance in English historiographical works; a figure of same celebrity; [Marlowe] could not 'sell' his readers the change that Grand Master Valette had surrendered the island; although since long in his mind Scott was stimulated to work out his last novel; the first publication of the play – unearthed until now – dates from 1633.*

Choice of vocabulary can produce obscure or unintended meanings: *to use as a trading basis; after he had additional received; a story set place in Malta; the just bygone period of the knights; discussing question of philosophy; his old acquaintant; an own nation; the pure picturesque; documentaric evidence; historic novels; economical importance; to proof the thesis; for Malta to provoke a German prince to a poetical work; a ratio-orientated society; the covering of the former lack of knowledge was a slow process; in which is described how a Jew unveiled to the attacking Ottomans how to enter best the fortress of Rhodes; started to get improved; the facts of action; composed a long poet in praise of; but there also stayed the sceptical comments against a place; stayed in good contacts with the latest excavations; galleys use to berth; payed a visit; does not seem to been influenced; to chose the island.* The informal register jars in an academic context: *prelims, willy-nilly, the medic Jean G.* And most unpardonable, in the age of the spell-check facility, are misspellings like: *illustrious, fictitious, colourfull, acquaintencies, laborous Maltese country folk; involment, obeserved, adress, mystrious, cabinett, abouth, althoug, passangers, the characterists of the Maltese, prositution, inhume, existance, Chrisendom, Royal Fusillers, advicer.*

It is evident and most regrettable that the author did not reread his work before submitting the manuscript and, worse still, that the editorial board did not appoint a reviser. This is standard practice among serious publishers and essential when non native speakers are involved. Moreover, no proof-reading was done. This first edition was sold out in a few weeks but, if a reprint is contemplated, the text must be thoroughly reviewed.

**Prof. Joseph M. Brincat**

**Mario Buhagiar, *The Christianisation of Malta: Catacombs, Cult Centres and Churches in Malta to 1530*, BAR International Series no. 1674, Oxford: Archeopress 2007.**

**pp. xiv + 321, illustrations (171 figures), bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-4073-0109-9.**

This book is actually the publication of Professor Mario Buhagiar's 1993 doctoral thesis which he had successfully submitted to the University of London. It may also be considered as a continuation to his Masters' thesis submitted to the same university in 1982 and also published by BAR in 1986 (no.302). Prof. Buhagiar, the Head of the History of Art Department within the Faculty of Arts of the University of Malta, is an avid, tireless and meticulous researcher in the development of Christianity in Malta with particular emphasis on the archaeological and artistic aspects. Much of the fruits of his ongoing research are contained in the above-mentioned publications and in his 2005 book about Maltese late medieval art and architecture.

Page i opens with a cautionary note, dated July 2006, in which the author very sensibly and honestly states that "this publication reproduces the unadulterated text of a doctoral thesis ... submitted ... in 1993" and that "research and publication have since then accelerated and provided an opportunity to adjust ideas and take different approaches to key issues." Prof. Buhagiar further states he has updated various ideas in recent publications, notably in his co-authored two-volume publication about Mdina in 1996 and the above-mentioned 2005 publication. Therefore, the publication under review presents an account of how things stood in 1993. Personally, I agree with Prof. Buhagiar that, notwithstanding a number of revisions during the last decade or so, this work remains "a coherent point of departure for the study of Christianity in Malta" and, I honestly believe, has great usefulness as a point of reference.

The abstract on page ii sums up, in a nutshell, what the author has set out to accomplish: "An analytical study of the origins and development of the Christian Church in Malta up to around 1500 AD through a reassessment and interpretation of source material" where "archaeology is considered against the background of documented history, and takes into account the textual and iconographic evidence." The question is whether Prof. Buhagiar succeeds or not in his aims. I believe he does and he goes about it by tackling the subject in a chronological, coherent manner and the use of language by which even the non-specialist readily understands the gist of his arguments, hypotheses and conclusions. The ten divisions of the book are built up in a way that each analysis leads to the next subject as this list clearly shows: the Pauline shipwreck controversy; the Roman prelude to Early Christian Malta; rock-cut tombs and miniature catacombs (a division which includes three appendices); the Tas-Silg and San Pawl Milqi archaeological sites; Byzantine Malta; the Arab conquest and Islam in Malta; Norman Malta and the Maltese Muslims; the

Christianisation of Malta; and the Latinization of Malta. All lead up to a summing-up of the conclusions reached.

Prof. Buhagiar's task was certainly not easy, especially where written evidence is very conspicuous by its absence over rather longish periods of time, thus making imperative his recourse to the unwritten sources in the form of archaeology which, in turn, was inadequately represented in scholarly publications in pre-1993 but that have increased by the present time. The end result is an objective, detailed and exhaustive rendition of the development of Christianity in Malta till the coming of the Order of St John in 1530. Throughout, the author very correctly regularly compares objects of study from the local scene with counterpart material found in other Mediterranean localities. Nor does he jump to quick conclusions and accepts everything which turns up as proof when, in reality, there are only indications. However, not everything is clear-cut. Whether St Paul was shipwrecked in Malta or not is still debated and Prof. Buhagiar's hypothesis that Basilian monks evangelised the local Muslims is, as rightly pointed out by the author himself, still just a theory. Nonetheless, the book is a very good contribution to the study of Maltese ecclesiastical history and is, in my opinion, indispensable for researchers delving in this branch of our islands' past.

The production of the book, including binding and printing, is attractive enough and certainly much more professionally-produced than the 1986 publication though proof-reading should have been much better. The 171 black-and-white figures (including the diagrams, maps and photographs) are clear with good indications as to the chapters they refer to. The bibliography is exhaustive, as is to be expected in such a work, and the index is very user-friendly. The fact that the book is a publication of the British Archaeological Reports Series (BAR) guarantees a worldwide distribution and a scholarly readership (I believe that the Prof. Buhagiar's 1986 publication is out of print). Likewise, this publication should find a ready place on the book-shelves of Maltese history specialists and of Melitensia lovers in general.

**Dr Joseph F. Grima**