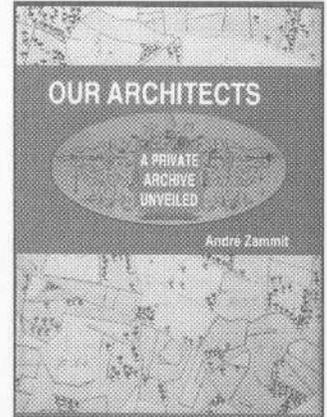


BOOK REVIEWS

André Zammit, *Our Architects – A Private Archive Unveiled*, PEG, Malta 2009, pp. 359, illustrated, index of names, ISBN: 979-99909-0-508-3 (paperback); 978-99909-0-509-0 (hardback)

This book is, in my considered opinion, a worthwhile contribution to the history of architecture in Malta. When André Zammit first talked to me about his family archive of papers intimately related to at least five generations of capomastri, *periti agrimensori* and architects, I realised that it could be of unique interest to the history of the visual arts in Malta in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a result, I strongly encouraged him to research and publish it. As he graphically describes in his introduction, this was not an easy undertaking, considering the state of deterioration that the papers were in, but he carried out the task with a patience and determination that demand respect. The result was well-worth the effort and the art historian owes him a debt of gratitude for the help that the book provides in adjusting perspectives and correcting misconceptions.



The value of the book can be better appreciated if considered in the context of the great strides forward – achieved since the grant of political independence in 1964 – in the study of the history of the visual arts in Malta, and in the protection and preservation of the Maltese cultural heritage. The following words are full of nostalgia and are perhaps autobiographical, but I shall be talking about events of poignant memory.

One of the salubrious side effects of Independence was the effervescent enthusiasm it provoked in all things that buttress the Maltese national identity. Under the expert direction and with the financial assistance of the Council for Cultural Cooperation of the Council of Europe, work started almost immediately on an ambitious Protective Inventory of Monuments and Sites. I was privileged to assist in the project as a young graduate in History of Art. This brought me into direct contact with the Maltese built heritage and with the leading art historians and architects of the time. A better research of the architectural history of the Maltese Islands became an acute necessity and good work was undertaken in state and ecclesiastical archives. Private archives such as that which André Zammit is lucky to own were then (and still are) largely inaccessible. The Protective Inventory was an experience from which I benefited greatly, but the project, which had achieved

notable progress, came to an unhappy end with the change in Government in 1971.

The 1964-71 years were a period of unparalleled national pride. There was a euphoric realisation of a rich and glorious past that was coming into meaningful terms with a European civilisation hallmarked by an art and architecture that made Malta an important artistic focus. In addition to the Protective Inventory, there were other important cultural initiatives in which, in spite of my young age, I was directly or indirectly involved. One was the 1970 Council of Europe Exhibition, organised in what was then the Governor-General's Palace. It was perhaps the most significant art exhibition ever organised in Malta and its beautifully produced catalogue has become a book of reference and a collector's item. Another initiative, among others, was the 1967 XV International Congress of the History of Architecture, organised at the Auberge de Castille, whose published proceedings is another essential reference work on Maltese architecture by a team of international scholars.

Nostalgic reminiscing apart, I very much believe that the cultural awakening that Malta is now experiencing, and of which André Zammit's book is a product, is very much indebted to what happened in the 1960s. This book is the latest in a long series of scholarly publications on art, architecture, and archaeology that hallmark the intervening period. *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands* which I published in 1987 provided, I modestly suggest, a meaningful context for the study of painting in Malta and, thanks to the foresight of Professor Peter Serracino-Inglott, I was requested to introduce History of Art courses (which included architecture) in the newly-refounded University of Malta. The courses eventually blossomed into the Department of History of Art that I currently direct. At about the same time, the late Leonard Mahoney published his *History of Maltese Architecture*. Important strides forward in putting the record straight on Maltese architecture have since been made by my esteemed colleague Professor Denis De Lucca among others. André Zammit's *Our Architects* is therefore the latest in a line of scholarly publications that, as pointed out earlier, has the unique merit of being the result of research in an exclusively private archive.

The other great merit of the book is that it shifts the focus of scholarly attention from the Knights' period to the British period which, contrary to what has sometimes been maintained, also boasts of a rich architectural heritage. Centring round the achievements of the author's architect ancestors, the author shows how the essentially Baroque language inherited from the Knights experienced the conditioning impact of Neo-Classicism and Romanticism, and how a generally successful synthesis was often achieved. It is a useful contribution to nineteenth and early twentieth century art in Malta.

The British Period produced native-born architects of note whose achievements are often overlooked. The record is put straight at the beginning of the book where the claims of George Whitmore are re-dimensioned and deserved merit given to

Maltese *capo maestri*, among them the artistically and technically gifted brothers Salvatore and Gaetano Xerri, whom the author counts among his ancestors.

Michele Cachia, another ancestor, gets a well-merited pride of place. A gifted architect, as well as an insufficiently sung hero who played a significant role in the Maltese uprising against the French, he was largely responsible for designing and supervising the building of strategically-located batteries for the siege of Valletta. An ardent anglophile, in 1802 he formed part of a Maltese delegation to London to secure the protection of the British Crown. Described by his better-known kinsman, Antonio Cachia, as '*molto abile e capace*' he was befriended by Sir Alexander Ball and Sir Charles Cameron and commissioned to design at least some of the so-called '*Giardini del Logotenente*' (the Maltese *Gonna tal-Kmand*) that were intended to teach the Maltese more scientific methods of agriculture. Their largely Neo-Classical architectural expression and layout is worthy of respect. His buildings and drawings also reveal a Neo-Classical bias. His greatest achievement is the richly-ornate portico of the Tal-Providenza Church at Siggiewi that has a vibrancy and a plastic articulation that single it out as one of the benchmarks of early nineteenth century Maltese architecture. The language here, however, is essentially Baroque and it may be a question of his effortless changing of hats depending on the source of the commission: a Neo-Classical hat when working for the civil establishment and a Baroque one when the commission came from the more conservative church.

Also worthy of attention and deserving a more in-depth study is Francesco Sammut whose designs reveal both versatility and fluency in Baroque and Neo-Classical idiosyncrasies. His drawings are, to me at least, an important revelation and I intend studying him in detail.

This is a book that should be read with great care because it has much to reveal. It is not, however, and I emphasise this, a book that appeals exclusively to the specialist. André Zammit has – by his own admission – steered a middle course 'between the rigours of the historian and the more relaxed style of the raconteur' and he has managed it with characteristic ease and remarkable success. It is a book with a wide appeal.

Mario Buhagiar

Mario Buhagiar, *Essays on the Knights and Art and Architecture in Malta 1500 – 1798*, Midsea Books, Malta 2009, pp. xviii + 332, illustrated, ISBN 978-99932-7-246-5.

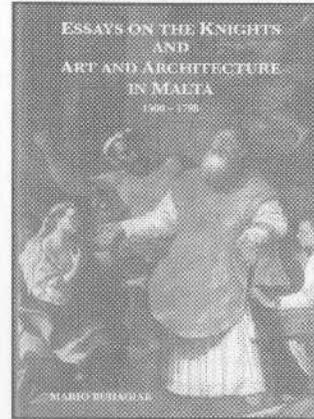
This publication, Professor Buhagiar's latest, collates a number of past contributions on diverse topics by an author who is a leading Maltese scholar in Art History and to whom the Maltese artistic and architectural milieu owes a great deal. Above

everything else, this book is a very convenient collection of essays that, in just over 300 pages, includes a preface, twenty essays, over 100 plates that serve as a very decent visual library which is indispensable for the understanding of the respective text, a bibliography and an exhaustive index. Published by Midsea Books, the book – well-produced and a pleasure to have and to hold – is presented in hardback format with a full colour cover depicting a poignant representation of Giuseppe d'Arena's *The Martyrdom of St Matthew* at Qrendi, a painting that had formerly been attributed to Mattia Preti.

All the essays have been carefully chosen by Prof. Buhagiar and are well-annotated with endnotes. The chapters, however, do not follow a chronological or any strict thematic sequence. For this reason, the book proves to be very comfortable to readers who prefer to read chapters randomly since, although focussed on one major theme that binds them all together, they are neither inter-dependent on their arrangement, nor are they inter-reliant. One can, for instance, be drawn to an essay title such as 'Images of Death in Early Modern Paintings in Malta', which is indeed well-written and a fascinating subject, and start with that.

Elements that are studied may be mentioned more than once in different essays, but the information imparted is not repetitive. Such instances include particular paintings, an artist, or even a Grand Master of the Order of St John who, perhaps, lived rather lavishly and princely and could do with more than just a mere mention. The latter is easily gauged in the opening pages with an essay titled 'Frivolous and Vainglorious Grand Master de Paule'. One will, moreover, learn a great deal about Favray through various essays, with information which is almost biographic. All this contributes to the Essays an encyclopaedic quality with which the reader's viewpoint changes due to the different perspectives used to divulge information. The author thus provides an understanding of the subject and mentions elements that are revisited in a different light without the problem of overlapping of content.

The essays' lengths vary. However, all are long enough to provide the reader with methodical information on the subject being discussed. This book will undeniably contribute to any reader's understanding of Maltese history and the art and architecture in question with knowledgeable facts. The reader will also become acquainted with life in Malta during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries from different aspects, since the author tackles elements of the major towns including Mdina and the (then) new city of Valletta, though focus is also placed on the countryside. Therefore, for instance, one shall not only be reading about Baroque



art and architecture and the influence that Guido Reni's *Risen Christ* had on local art and architecture but also on the Order's Rhodian heritage which includes the illustrious and vast collection of relics and reliquaries, Byzantine artefacts – the more important of which are the images of Our Lady of Philermos (now in the National Museum of Cetinje, Montenegro) and the Damascena Madonna (now in the Greek Church in Valletta) – as well as vernacular Maltese art. Emphasis is made on the importance of Malta being multi-cultural under the Order, a natural consequence resulting from the Knights' different countries of origin which affected the choice of artists, engineers, and architects for the different languages.

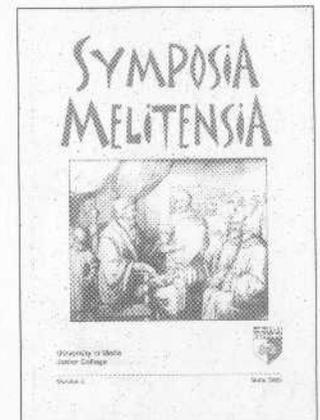
As the author states in the preface, the essays have been edited but not updated, since the essays were originally written over a period of 43 years (from 1964 to 2007) and published in various Maltese and foreign journals and other publications or delivered as lectures or contributions in seminars. Naturally, developments have taken place throughout these years, but these essays have not lost their importance nor their appeal.

Mario Buhagiar's latest book reads well as a complete and methodical treatise on the art and architecture in question, and it is perhaps needless to say that *Essays on the Knights and Art and Architecture in Malta 1500 – 1798* lives up to expectations.

Charlene Vella

Joe Zammit-Ciantar (editor), *Symposia Melitensia*, Number 5, University of Malta Junior College, Malta 2008, pp. ii + 142. ISSN: 1812-7509

Symposia Melitensia is an annual academic journal published by the Junior College of the University of Malta that collates a number of researched papers connected with history, literature and culture, a number of which deal with aspects of Maltese History. In a way, it is a successor to *Hyphen*, a journal of melitensia and the humanities that was published thrice annually between 1977 and 1995 by the Gian Frangisk Abela Sixth Form, the forerunner of the present Junior College. This fifth number of the *Symposia* series, dated 2008 but published in 2009, includes a number of welcome papers dealing with Maltese History.



The leading paper, 'Orations on the Victory of the Order of St John over the Turks in 1565 and on the occasion of the Laying of the

Foundation Stone of Valletta in 1566' is written by the editor Joe Zammit-Ciantar who here publishes the text of two orations delivered by the Augustinian Fr Spiritus Pelo Anguisciola to the Chapter-General of the Order of St John held in February 1566 and at the ceremony of the laying of the foundation stone of Valletta later that same year. Both texts are reproduced from original manuscripts discovered by the author at the National Library of Florence, Italy. Apart from the texts, the introductory comments and notes are really worth reading as they put the two orations in their proper historical context and convey valuable information on the *dramatis personae*. The oration to the Chapter-General is being published for the first time though the other was first reproduced in 1647 by Gio. Francesco Abela.

Thomas Freller, in his 'The Abate Vella and his Forgeries – Some notes on the background of his works', follows up his scholarly publication of 2001 about the forgeries of Abate Giuseppe Vella by here trying to trace the motives behind the forgeries and conclude whether he was inspired by similar frauds carried out in Andalucia in Spain. Emanuel Buttigieg takes his cue from a statement by Giacomo Bosio's words *The Pope wants to be the ruin of this Religion* to examine how the relationship between the Order of St John, France and the Papacy in the 17th century created opportunities and problems for the Knights and its ability to fight for the Faith. Mostly suited for teachers of History but also very relevant for general consumption, George Cassar's paper entitled 'Appreciating Fortified Cities: an Educational Perspective' argues that fortified cities have remained important centres for the transmission of historical, social, architectural and cultural education for students and tourists who visit them.

Joe Felice-Pace's 'Maltese Legal Jargon' is a 10-page short dictionary that explains about 140 legal terms (the author rightly insists that the list is by no means exhaustive) used in Maltese contexts but which sound like – and, I believe, really are – loan words from Italian that have sometimes developed meanings different to their Italian origin. If made available to the general public in some way, I believe that this article could go a long way to help many people understand the legal mumbo-jumbo heard in notarial offices when deeds or wills are being drawn up or to fully comprehend what their own lawyers are saying in court. In fact, the author is correct in stating 'that legal jargon is interlaced with a vocabulary that is neither registered in Maltese dictionaries nor used in common everyday parlance.' This long list indicates that, so many years after the Language Question was supposedly buried in the 1930s, indirect use of Italian is still being made in legal matters.

Two papers about literature, one about the Maltese language, another about computing and data processing, and a paper about complementary translation complete the contents. All are interesting and the paper about computers – entitled 'Early Computing and Data Processing in Malta' – will probably, at some future date, qualify as a "must read" history paper. I have refrained from speaking about their contents because I have restricted my comments to the papers pertaining to History.

All the papers (including those I have not commented on) are profusely annotated with footnotes that not just conform to the house style adopted by the editorial board but show quite clearly that the papers are based on sound research. The cover, general printing and lay-out are clear and neat with no real noticeable mistakes though *Pope Paul V*, on page 2, should read *Pope Pius V*. Although the inclusion of more visual material would have enhanced the publication, *Symposia Melitensia* is, in my opinion, a very useful and worthwhile addition to our melitensia.

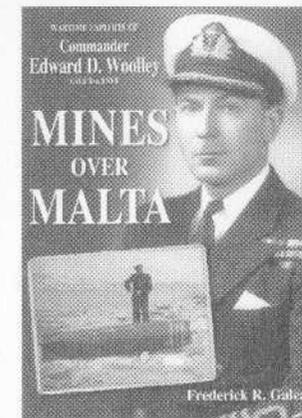
Joseph F. Grima

TWO BOOKS ABOUT MALTA IN WORLD WAR II – SHORT APPRECIATIONS

Frederick R. Galea, *Mines Over Malta – Wartime Exploits of Commander Edward D.W. Woolley*, Wise Owl Publications, Malta 2008, pp. 136, illustrated. ISBN 978-99932-84-5

Although the cover and the title page of this publication makes the reader think that the book was wholly written by Mr Galea, the first 55 pages are actually autobiographical, as is in fact made clear, on page 9, in Galea's own introduction. In these 55 pages, we have the personal memoirs of the work carried out by Commander Woolley who, throughout the Second World War, was a member of the highly dangerous "Bomb Disposal (and dismantling, I may add) Unit", which included making safe the many mines dropped by enemy aircraft and for which he was twice decorated for bravery with the *George Medal* and *Bar*. Commander Woolley was posted to Malta between June 1941 and September 1943, so this section of his memoirs related directly to our island. On his death, his written memoirs were sent to Malta by his widow and Mr Galea is to be commended for publishing them in this book, thus adding to the many valid publications about Malta in the war years.

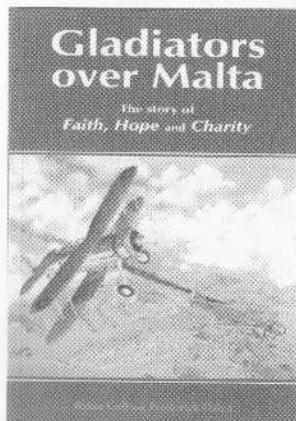
Very wisely, Galea adds a sizeable appendix that includes 14 complementary reports that highlight clearly the very dangerous work which Woolley and his colleagues carried out. The book is profusely and very well illustrated with an attractive cover fully focussed on the subject and relevant photos on the back and inside covers. However, since the author mainly carried out editing work, this should have been clearly stated at the outset. Unfortunately, the book lacks an index.



Brian Cull / Frederick Galea, *Gladiators Over Malta – The Story of Faith, Hope and Charity*, Wise Owl Publications, Malta 2008, pp. 120, illustrated. ISBN 978-99932-92-78-4

A very good and profusely illustrated publication about the three *Gladiator* biplanes that were Malta's first line of air defence when the island found itself on the front line of World War II. The authors are very careful to be precise in the way they recount the facts as they occurred and speak clearly about the romanticism which has evolved over the years about these aeroplanes, especially with regard to how they acquired their names and their exact number.

The book begins with an interesting preamble in which the authors try to expound Malta's preparedness – or rather, the lack of it – in 1940 so that they could explain the part played by these biplanes and their pilots in their heroic defence of the Maltese islands. No less than twelve good appendices add to the interest of the publication which, however, is devoid of an index, something I deem to be indispensable in such a publication. The inside covers include excellent drawings of the *Gladiators* by Richard J. Caruana, with the attractive covers themselves being focussed on the subject. I disliked the publisher's advertisement (on the last page) for other books about Malta at war. This is a practice, also adopted by other publishers, which I feel should be discontinued even though the books themselves deal with broadly the same subject.



Joseph F. Grima