

Graduation Ceremony 1
Graduand's Address
Friday 18 November 2011 at 1630hrs
JESUITS' CHURCH – VALLETTA

Roger Vella Bonavita
Ph.D graduand and representative of the students

**A Maltese-Australian researches the life and career of a somewhat obscure
sixteenth-century Tuscan architect and military engineer**

I can think of a few reasons why I was invited to make this oration. Firstly, since I live in Australia it may be thought curious that, though living so far away from my sources in Malta and mainland Europe, I researched, wrote and presented a thesis on a somewhat obscure sixteenth-century Tuscan military engineer. Secondly I am clearly not a bright young historian embarking on his career in academe. At 71 years of age I am about to enter what I hope and pray will be the long and lucid evening of my life. So why did I bother to undertake this task? Thirdly I probably have much a longer connection with this University than the vast majority of those present besides being much older than most of you too.

Consequently some background information about myself is called for.

After my secondary education at St Edward's College, I took my honours degree in history and then my masters degree at Manchester University. In 1965 I joined the then Royal University of Malta as a lecturer in history. When I consider the university today and its achievements, and those of the department of history, I am amazed by the changes. Back in 1965 the history curriculum included a course on the Tudor and Stuart kings and queens of England, the course in European history stopped at the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 and the course in Maltese history ran from 1530 to 1798. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were not covered at all because, as I was told, recent events were too controversial! I should explain that arts subjects then were mainly introductory studies for the professional courses in laws, theology and so on. Things did improve: the BA General and Honours degrees became the main focus of the Faculty of Arts and in history we were able eventually to take Maltese and European history right up to contemporary times. We also helped develop general courses in Mediterranean Civilisation for all students in order to provide our graduates with a general knowledge about independent Malta's environment.

Looking at the department of history today—which has branched out further to include new postgraduate programmes such as Hospitaller studies and Mediterranean Historical Studies—together with the offerings of other departments within the Faculty of Arts as well as centres of learning outside the Faculty, catering for art and architectural history, the baroque, archives studies, and others in a University of Malta which itself is many

times larger than it was in my day, what we did in the late 1960's and early 1970's all seems pretty rudimentary; one might say almost prehistoric. Still there was a shift in focus away from the rulers of Malta (i.e. Grand Masters and Governors) to topics that were of interest to us as Maltese. Great importance was given to individual research using primary source materials and individual tuition.

As most of you will recall, the University went through a crisis in the late 1970's and early 1980's - to put it mildly. This is not the place to discuss the traumatic events of those years - though they must never be forgotten. Suffice it to say that having suffered physical violence and other humiliations I thought it prudent (if I may use biblical terminology) to rise up and shake the dust from my raiment. And so I girded my loins, took up my staff and departed together with my family and chattels and my books and papers to a land far, far away across the seas where I could get on with my life in peace and quiet.

I had an exciting, though somewhat rough ride, in my new home in Perth, Western Australia.

There being no great interest in Australia in the history of Malta and its fortifications, I left academe and worked at various times as an executive in industry and as a consultant to government. I ran my own company and I managed the commercial arms of universities. I have to say that Australia was extremely good to me and my family. We have all done well – my daughter took her doctorate some 20 years ago and she is now associate dean in a huge university in Perth. My wife became a teacher-librarian. She joined the largest Roman Catholic school in Perth to run its library – which she actually designed. I was able to take early retirement from paid employment and so I returned to my books.

It seemed the natural thing to do.

In 2003, after writing a couple articles on aspects of the history of Malta, I thought it would be fun to research the life of Capitano Francesco di Niccolo di Marcantonio Laparelli da Cortona who inter alia designed and built Valletta. Little had been written about him and most of his extant papers were in a private collection in Cortona. Here, I thought, was a very straight forward project that would keep me happily occupied for two or three years at most. But as the work progressed I became nervous because I had not worked as a historian for some twenty years. So I proposed to turn the project into a doctorate so that if my work satisfied my peers it would go onto the shelves of a university library. I also felt strongly that I should also produce an edition of Laparelli's surviving papers to support the text of my thesis and so make them fully accessible to future scholars.

I must admit that there was an element of natural ambition too.

I quickly established that I would not get very far with Australian universities because it would be difficult to find a supervisor. So I looked to the University of Malta, my old

Alma Mater. The regulations seemed straight forward: I had a research degree from a good University, I had published some articles and, having taught at the University for eighteen years or so, I was certainly known there. I could also show that I would be a full time student and I noted that there was no requirement in the regulations for doctoral students to reside in Malta. So one day, unannounced, I knocked on the door of Professor Dominic Fenech, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Head of the Department of History. I made my request and after a short discussion we asked Emeritus Professor Godfrey Wettinger to be my supervisor. I left them to see my application through the procedures and went back to my researches.

That was the easy bit.

It quickly became evident that the information in Laparelli's papers had to be supplemented by an in-depth study of many aspects of the environments in which he worked if I was going adequately to assess his contribution to architecture and military engineering in Cortona and Tuscany, in Rome and the Papal States and last but not least in Malta. What was his family background, who educated and who trained him, what texts did he study? What part did he play in the fortification of Cortona and other places in Tuscany? Why did the Duke of Tuscany decide to build these fortifications in the first place? Why did he move to Rome? How was it that in next to no time he was in charge of major projects; fortifying Castel S. Angelo and the walls of the Vatican (some three and a half kilometres of bastions and curtains)? Did he really design and build the walls of the Borgo Pio, the first extension of the urban area of the city of Rome since antiquity, and lay out its streets? Why was he chosen to assist, and probably to succeed, Michelangelo as architect in charge of building the huge dome of St Peter's in Rome – the greatest architectural project in Europe? More to the point, in the event, why didn't he succeed Michelangelo? Why was he sent to Malta in 1565 (he arrived here late in December that year)? On what basis did he design the defences of Valletta and its street plan?

Over arching these issues was the role of Gabrio Serbelloni, a soldier and military engineer and knight of Malta. He was a favoured nephew of Pope Pius IV and described as Laparelli's patron. Sadly the Serbelloni archives in Milan were destroyed during the last world war. The list of questions arising from my very sketchy knowledge of Laparelli's life and work stretched to the horizon and beyond. None could be satisfactorily answered from Laparelli's own papers as these mainly covered the technical aspects of his work. I felt I might have bitten off more than I could chew for I knew very little about the Tuscany of Cosimo de' Medici or Renaissance Rome though I knew I had to approach the problems relating to Malta through the Spanish archives at Simancas near Valladolid in Spain.

Chipping away at these questions and gradually transcribing and translating Laparelli's papers took years of research and many visits to archives and libraries in Europe (which thanks to Australia I could afford) besides long hours of research on the internet and voluminous correspondence with academics in many countries.

As the years went by many of my friends became concerned that the project would fail - and there were sceptics who were sure that it would. One friend remarked, rather unkindly I thought, that the magnum opus was taking me longer to write than had taken to build Valletta! Finally on Christmas day 2010 the thesis and three volumes of Laparelli's papers were completed. After a rush to print, collate and bind the three copies required by the regulations, DHL delivered the thesis to the office of the Dean at the University on January 4th 2011, some four hours before the deadline for presentation. The viva voce examination took place in May and the examiners expressed themselves satisfied with my text as presented and three months later DHL duly delivered two hard bound copies to the Dean's office in compliance with the regulations.

So here I am today on this happy and dignified occasion which is in marked contrast to the last graduation ceremony of this university that I attended in 1978.

But the credit is not mine alone: I must acknowledge at least some of those who made it possible for me to stand here before you all.

My history teacher at St Edward's College was Roderick Cavaliero and he lit the fire. My tutor at Manchester was Penry Williams. He taught me all I know about historical methodology and the assessment and evaluation of historical records. The late Quentin Hughes introduced me to the 'mysteries' of fortification, while Albert Ganado showed me how to study and read old maps and plans. Between them Dominic Fenech and Godfrey Wettinger guided me through the procedures of the University. I cannot thank them enough for without them I would have fallen at the first hurdle and probably at the last too.

Of course there are unimaginable quantities of materials available to scholars on the internet: books, articles, images, catalogues and also manuscripts. But access to private individuals is limited and at times expensive. I was fortunate: the history department of the University of Western Australia took me under its wing. I became an honorary research fellow, gave some lectures and seminars and given access to the library and the on line databases. The appointment gave me access to libraries and archives and to academics everywhere. I would send emails out of the blue more or less on the lines of "Dear Professor etc, I am a Maltese academic now living in Perth, Australia and working on Francesco Laparelli etc, Please can you help me with...?" It is amazing how many replied positively and emailed or posted materials. They would often suggest other lines of enquiry or contacts. I met a number of them during research visits to Europe returning laden with printed and digitised materials. I will never forget their generosity.

Since most will be unknown to us here I cannot name all those who so generously helped me. But I must identify a number them: Marino Vigano in Milan, Daniela Lamberini in Florence, Nicoletta Marconi, Giorgio Simoncini and Piero Spagnesi in Rome, Maurizio Arfaoli in Empoli, Enrico Sisi in Arezzo, Catherine Rinne and Glenn Andres in the United States, Joseph Imorde in Germany, Concepcion Porras Gil in Valladolid, Maroma Camilleri and Joan Abela in Malta. Special thanks are due to Edoardo Mirri of the

Accademia Etrusca di Cortona (of which I am now an elected member) and to the late Contessa Laparelli Pitti Magi Diligenti and her daughters Bianca Maria and Nicoletta. I must thank my friends Louis and Susi Camilleri Preziosi and Austin and Maureen Laferla too for providing me with accommodation and company during my visits to Malta and to many other friends here both within the University and outside.

There is one who has walked every step with me on this very long journey; one who reduced my notes and books and papers from utter chaos into order, a historian who read my drafts critically and a companion who encouraged me when I despaired – my wife Judith. Thank you Judith. This day and this doctorate is as much yours as it is mine.

Thank you all.