Proposal for the 3rd MMHN Conference

Dr Chessell

Britain’s Ionian Consul: Spiridion Foresti and the Return to the Islands, 1807-1810.

The year 2010 marks the two hundredth anniversary of the capture of St Maura by British Forces and Greek volunteers from the French Garrison. St Maura was the last of the southern Ionian Islands to be taken in the period 1809-10, leaving only Corfu in French hands. This change marked the rapid decline of French power in the Adriatic as the war’s focus shifted to Spain and northern Europe.

For Spiridion Foresti, the British Minister to the Ionian Islands, but in exile on Malta, it marked the completion of a nearly three year campaign that he had waged to eject the French from his home Islands after their occupation under secret provisions of the Treaty of Tilsit in 1807. On the signing of the Treaty Napoleon had sent urgent dispatch riders to Italy to take over power in the Islands from Russia and to begin the process of garrisoning the Islands before British interference. Foresti at Corfu barely escaped capture and set out in a small craft on a dangerous mission to warn the British Commander Lord Collingwood who was at Tenedos. Despite heavy storms he reached Tenedos as the craft literally sank from under him, bringing Collingwood the first direct intelligence of the French occupation and of the likely fate of the substantial Russian Fleet left in the Adriatic. He sailed with Collingwood to the Adriatic to survey the situation and institute a new naval blockade strategy, on then to Malta where he remained until 1809, gathering and disseminating intelligence from his many contacts in the Islands. Foresti played a significant role in managing Ali Pacha of Ioannina during this period, as the struggle between Britain and France for the support of the Vizir was played out. He worked closely with Colonel William Leake who returned to a post at Ioannina in early 1809 on a mission to build the Pacha’s alliance with Britain and supply him with promised war materials. Foresti’s meetings with Byron on Malta during this period led Byron to change his travel plans from Smyrna to Ioannina and so the ‘Childe Harold’ was born.

Foresti waged a campaign with the British Commanders and the home Government expounding the value of invading the Ionian Islands, but circumstances did not favour the enterprise despite Collingwood’s encouragement until late in 1809. Forces under General Oswald took the Islands of Zante, Cephalonia, Ithaca and Cerigo with little opposition in 1809 but had to wait until 1810 before taking the heavily defended St Maura. Foresti accompanied Oswald on the recommendation of Collingwood and played a major role in the success of these operations, providing advice on local physical and cultural geography, landing with the invading forces and taking part in the battle for St Maura where he was wounded. He is credited by Oswald for the suggestion that the Greek volunteer forces fighting with the British under the leadership of Major Richard Church, the future hero of the Greek War of Independence, fly the Greek flag which encouraged many of the Greek levies in the French forces to desert, leading
to the surrender of the Fort. Foresti then filled his Minister role until the change of governance arrangements made the position redundant as Britain settled into a long occupation of the Islands.

This account of the Ionian Operations will be used to bring out the ever-changing struggle between the major powers for dominance in the Adriatic and the access to influence, territory and routes to the east as the Ottoman Empire threatened to disintegrate. And also the achievements of the Royal Navy that for so many years prevented the expansion of France beyond the Ionian Islands, led since Trafalgar by the towering figure of the supreme strategist Admiral Lord Collingwood.

Original sources will mainly be used in this paper, in conjunction with key published texts.

CV

Dr Chessell, appointed as Chief Scientist of South Australia in 2008, completed a PhD in physics at Melbourne University, and followed a career in the defence science, retiring as Australia’s Chief Defence Scientist in 2003. He has held positions as Adjunct Professor in Systems Engineering with the University of South Australia and as Chair of the School of Chemistry and Physics External Advisory Board at Adelaide University. He was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering in 2003.

Dr Chessell is researching Mediterranean history with a focus on the Ionian Islands during the period 1780-1830 and published a paper at the Messina Conference of the MMHN.