

By John D. ...

Sir Walter Scott
in
Malta

21st November=13th December
1831.

Speech delivered by the Honble. CARMELO MIFSUD BONNICI, LL.D., M.L.A., Minister for the Treasury, on the occasion of the unveiling of a Tablet to commemorate the visit of the great writer.

“At about 1.30 p.m. on the 21st September, 1832, Sir Walter Scott breathed his last in the presence of his children. It was a beautiful day, so warm that every window was wide open, and so perfectly still that the sound of all other most delicious to his ear, the gentle ripple of the Tweed over its pebbles, was distinctly audible as we knelt around the bed and his eldest son kissed and closed his eyes”.

The quotation is from Lockhart's "Life of Sir Walter Scott". It describes the passing away of one of the greatest favourites of humanity—in Wordsworth's words "the whole world's darling".

Few other literary men in the wide range of world literature have been so eminently successful in instilling in their readers such lofty ideals of honour, bravery and chivalry, and no one, perhaps, before or after him, has reached the height and intensity of his popularity.

The scene thus described by Lockhart happened at Abbotsford a hundred years ago. This, by itself, would not have justified the erection of a commemorative tablet in Malta. There is, however, a historical fact connected with the great novelist which ought to interest both us Maltese and others that visit our Island, viz: Sir Walter's stay in Malta for a short period extending from the 21st November to the 13th December, 1831, less than a year before his death.

By then, he had already attained the zenith of his worldwide reputation as a romantic poet and novelist. Particularly so in connection with the novel introduced by him into the field of history and literature as a new form of expression for narration, an innovation of far reaching influence which goes beyond the limits of English Letters. Before him it was almost as our Zammit styles it "spretum genus". Victor Hugo ('Les Miserables') and Leo Tolstoi ('Anna Karenina' and 'War and Peace') will later on apply it to contemporary history, intermixing with this the grave social problems of sex, love, happiness and morality. In Italy its tradition goes to connect it with the masterpiece of the epoch, "I Promessi Sposi" by Manzoni. And from the stage it reaches in the "Lothair" of Benjamin Disraeli, Sienkiwcz ('Quo Vadis?') and Wiseman's ('Fabiola') derive the most powerful apologetics for Christianity, and Hercejz ('The Pagans') those for Paganism. No wonder then that the moment he set foot in Malta he was literally besieged by crowds of admirers desirous of doing him honour. Invitations were showered upon him and the members of the Union Club, amongst many others, gave a dance in his honour in the great room of the Auberge de Provence—an odd kind of honour, as the guest remarks in his diary, to bestow on a man of letters suffering from paralytic illness.

Sir John Hookham Frere, another eminent man of letters, was then in Malta and resided in that Villa at Pietà which to-day bears his name. His remains are still amongst us in the Misida Bastion Cemetery.

Frere, himself a scholar in both Greek and Latin classics, a qualified writer in Italian, French and Spanish, a distinguished English poet and epigrammatist, was rightly looked upon for his generosity in handling a handsome private fortune along with the display of his intellectual gifts, as a sort of Mecœnas. He tried to honour his friend by trying to induce the Consiglio of the University to give "2 premj", wrote our own countryman Dr. G. Clinquant, "l'uno del valore di scudi 50 e l'altro di scudi 25 a chi tra gli studiosi dell'Università il miglior latino poetico arrecato avesse il cui tema essere dovea una giaculatoria a Sir Walter Scott".

It is a pity that we know neither the authors nor the latin compositions to which Dr. Clinquant refers, for which Frere had to pay out of his own pocket. Two other latin odes we have, however, the work not of students but of one of the best known scholars in Europe in that period, a Maltese priest, the Abate Giuseppe Zammit, to whom I have already made reference. The first composition is dedicated to Frere, and expresses the poet's despair on feeling unable to sing adequately the paeans of such a personage as Sir Walter Scott whose great merits he felt too great a burden for his shoulders. So he says to Frere "Take you the harp and give him a worthier song yourself"

FRERE, FACUNDIS NUMERIS AMICUM
TU POTIS DOCTUS CELEBRARE, TUQUE
DAM VIRI MAGNI UBERIORE LAUDES
DICERE VENA.

The other composition is inspired by Scott's departure for Naples and is a warning to the boat conveying Scott to make her realise who is the person entrusted to her:

O Navis vale, cui datur
Tantum efferre caput pondus amabile,
Claro nomine præditum,
Tu fers Gualtherium.

And the poet assigns to her the same destiny which betook the boat of the Argonauts.

Sic tu quæ mare forsitan
Quondam nobilior sidera naviges.

Sir Walter was simply charmed with Valletta, *the splendid town quite like a dream*. Twice did he walk in pious pilgrimage to St. John's Cathedral - *the magnificent church*, as he admiringly records in his diary. When taken to Strada Stretta and told that that was the place where the young and fiery knights used to fight their duels, he exclaimed: "It will be hard if I cannot make something of this".

To a temperament like his the last romantic stronghold of chivalry with its palaces and superb cathedral, where in the mystery of death lie La Valette and the other heroes of the past, could not but appeal very strongly. His imagination was again stirred and though already in his period of decay, both mental and physical, he felt inspired to tell a noble tale of glory, splendour and heroism. That is how he became imbued with the idea of a new work which was to be the last of the Waverley Novels, *The Siege of Malta*.

The greater part of this novel, started in our Island, was written in Naples and this is what the writer himself says about it in a letter to Lockhart:

"If it succeeds it will in a great measure enable me to attain the long projected and very desirable object of clearing me from all

encumbrances and expiring as rich a man as I could desire in my own freehold. After the *Siege of Malta* I intend to close the series of Waverley with a poem in the style of the *Lay* or rather of the *Lady of the Lake* to be a *l'Envoy* or final postscript of these tales'.

This work, however, remained unfinished and the last words of the manuscript are an unfinished sentence: "Thus a line of princes.....", which probably are the last relic of an exuberant imaginative power unable to assume the material form of words.

Scott sent his publisher, Caddell, three volumes of this work, representing more than three-fourths of the projected novel. In its unfinished state it contains 85,000 words and the poet predicted a sale of 2,500 copies.

It never saw the light and Lockhart, who considered it 'an indubitable proof of waning powers', even went so far as to pronounce a 'solemn curse' on the person who would publish it. It is hoped, however, that in the interest of all concerned somebody will take up the challenge and defy this solemn curse. Scott and all he did have long ceased to belong to anyone in particular. His works are the common heritage of the world of letters irrespective of languages and creeds. It is encouraging to note that in 1928 a proposal was made to submit the Mss to a commission of experts and obtain their opinion on the matter of publication. Nothing came of it and the most recent information concerning the manuscript is that in 1931 General Maxwell Scott sold it privately to Mr. Gabriel Wells, its present owner.

Before asking Your Excellency to unveil this tablet may I be allowed to add that this place was chosen for the erection as it is the actual site of the Palazzo Britto converted, even before Sir Walter's visit, into the old Beverley's Hotel, a *capital hotel* in the opinion of Benjamin Disraeli, who lived there, in 1830.

Although one of Your Excellency's predecessors in office, Sir Frederick Cavendish Ponsonby, had provided a house for Scott, and although several of the people of Malta placed their private residence at his disposal, he preferred to be quiet, free and to himself in what he describes as an 'excellent apartment in the Beverley's Hotel'.

We were taught in our University days that great though Scott may be, he has no message as an author to convey to mankind. But listen to this extract from Lockhart describing the last moments of the great man we are commemorating:

"As I was dressing on the morning of Monday the 17th September, Nicholson came into my room and told me that his master had awoke in a state of composure and consciousness and wished to see me immediately. I found him entirely himself, though in the last extremes of feebleness. His eye was clear and calm and every trace of the wild fire of delirium extinguished. 'Lockhart' he said 'I may have but a minute to speak to you. My dear be a good man—be virtuous—be religious—be a good man. Nothing else will comfort you when you come to lie here'. He paused and I said: 'Shall I send for Sophia and Anne?' 'No' said he 'don't disturb them. Poor souls. I know they were up all night. God bless you all'. With this he sank into a very tranquil sleep and, indeed, he scarcely afterwards gave any signs of consciousness except for an instant on the arrival of his sons".

This quotation from Lockhart conveys to us a message—a good, pious and religious message—which in this epoch of materialism we should cherish and keep fresh in our minds. In truth, it is not the message of the

author but of the *man*, who, when his life is studied, is even greater than his works. He accepted life as it is in humility and joy and whether in prosperity or adversity there was always in him the gentleman playing his part nobly and fearlessly.

Byron said of him that "he was the only successful genius as genuinely loved as a man and admired as an author" and Carlyle—the terrible apocalyptic Carlyle—looked upon Scott as the "soundest specimen of British manhood put together in the 18th century of time".

Posterity has found nothing exaggerated in the judgment of such as were contemporaries of Scott.

And, now, while tendering public thanks to Dr. Laferla, the Director of Elementary Schools, for his help in placing all possible information at my disposal and for asking my cooperation for the erection of this tablet, and to my colleague the Minister for Public Works and to the Public Works Staff whose work the tablet is, and more especially so to the owners of St. Paul's Buildings for having allowed the enmurement of the tablet, I formally beg Your Excellency to unveil the tablet, which all of us hope will be the first of a series of others, to record distinguished literary and political personalities who visited our dear Island home.



APPENDIX I.

MALTA GOVERNMENT GAZETTE

No. 1089]

WEDNESDAY, 14th DECEMBER, 1831.

[Price 3d.

All Public Acts appearing in this Gazette, signed by the proper Authorities, are to be considered as Official and obeyed as such.

By Command,

FREDERICK HANKEY,
Chief Secretary to Government.

MALTA, 14th DECEMBER, 1831.

SAILED.—On the 10th instant H. M. Cutter *Hind*, for Napoli di Romania.
On the 13th H. M. Frigate *Barham*, Capt. H. Pigot, for Naples.

IN PORT.—*Ganges*, 84, *Donegal*, 78, *Alfred*, 50, and *Scylla*, 18.

Yesterday Sir Walter Scott, accompanied by his son and daughter, Major Walter Scott, and Miss Anne Scott, embarked in His Majesty's Ship *Barham*, Capt. Hugh Pigot, for Naples.

Sir Walter arrived here on the 21st of last month; and after being released from quarantine, he resided in Valletta, for the space of 15 days, during which he was the object of the respectful attention of all classes of the inhabitants of Malta, whose feelings were highly gratified by the visit to the Island of this celebrated personage,—so remarkable for excellence as a Poet and a Novellist, perhaps more so in the latter capacity, in which he

MALTA, 14 DICEMBRE 1831.

PARTITI.—Il 10 corrente, Cutter di S. M. *Hind*, per Napoli di Romania.—
Il 13, Fregata di S. M. *Barham*, Cap. H. Pigot, per Napoli.

IN PORTO.—*Ganges*, 84, *Donegal*, 78, *Alfred*, 50, e *Scylla*, 18.

Jeri Sir Walter Scott, in compagnia di suo figlio, e sua figlia, del Maggiore Walter Scott, e di Miss Anne Scott, si è imbarcato a bordo della Nave di Sua Maestà *Barham* Cap. Hugh Pigot, per Napoli.

Sir Walter giunse qui il 21 dello scorso mese; e dopo terminata la sua quarantina, risedette in Valletta per lo spazio di 15 giorni, durante il qual tempo è stato l'oggetto delle rispettose attenzioni di tutte le classi degli abitanti di Malta, ai quali è stata gratissima la venuta in quest' Isola, di questo celebre personaggio, così tanto rimarchevole e come Poeta e come Novelliero; e per avventura molto più in quest' ultima qualità, nella quale riman senza rivali sia ne' tempi antichi che nei moderni.

IOANNI H. FRERE BRITANNO
MULTIPLICI ERUDITIONE LINGUARUMQUE PERITIA
VIRO EXIMIO
DE SUO CONCIVE DIGNISSIMO
GUALTHERIO SCOTT EQ. BAR.
SCRIPTORE POLITISSIMO
CUM MELITAM ADVENISSET AN. MDCCCXXXI.

ODE.

Quidnam ego, infelix! celebrare sumo
Pectine imbelli egregii decoras
Gualtherii laudes, mihi dum faventes
Denegat auras
Phoebus et multa rabie tumescens
Me antea suetum cecinisse parva
Posse lesboum renuit, vetatque
Tendere plectrum?
Maxime o vatum angligenûm, Joannes,
Cui dedit puram pater ipse vocem,
Patriae cultor, latiaeque linguae,
Praecipe cantus.
Frere, Maecenas genere ac avorum
Nomine insignis, titulisque magne,
Extulit quem jam generosa ad astra
Inclyta virtus:
Cui impedit laurus viridans capillos,
Quemque doctarum hederæ Maroni
Frontium et Flacco, Iliadosque Cycno
Praemia miscent:
O mihi, Vates, faveas, tuoque
Spiritu pectus repleas, et ecce
Protinus conor tenuis potenti
Grandia nisu.
En vide ut fastu Melite superbo
Stet triumphatrix oriens ab undis,
Cum in sinu magnum recipit britannum
Parvula civem.
Gualtheri salve decus o Tuorum,
Dissitis cujus memoratur oris
Nomen, et Pindi recinit jocosa
Montis imago.
Gallici multo ex numero exarantûm
Res Ducis gestas, probus aestimator
Jure te rerum historia et canit po-
emate dignum.
Sique quaesitam meritis inique
Invidus palmam tibi denegabit,
Fama te extollet, tuaque explicabunt
Scripta vigorem.
Sola jam novit tua mens vel ipsam
Fabulam multo decorare cultu,
Unde virtutis, duce te, magistra
Fabula facta est.
Haecenus spretum genus hoc jacebat,
Utile at dulci catus ipse miscens,
Gualtheri, mores facilis reformas,
Scote, juventae.
Quidnam ego tantum aggrediar laborem?
Qui potis quercus fidibus canoris
Ducere auritas operosa fingens
Carmina vates;
Frere, facundis numeris Amicum
Tu potis doctus celebrare, tuque
Tam Viri magni uberiore laudes
Dicere vena.

AD NAVEM
QUA GUALTHERIUS SCOTT MELITA PROFICISCENS
NEAPOLIM VEHEBATUR.

ODE.

Sic te sic pelagi potens
Numen velivoli, Tyndaridae maris
Fratres fulgida sidera;
Obstringens Boream carcere mitior
Sic te dirigat Aeolus,
Emissa Zephyro, quae tibi creditum
Debes Gualtherium, ratis :
Reddas conspicuis Parthenopes, precor,
Oris, et decus inclytæ
Serves Gualtherium grande Britannidis,
Quo vix vidimus alterum
Majorem studiis. Parvula gestiens
Oh quanta, Melite, excipis
Doctrina eximios laetitia viros!
Gaude et jure quidem, loco
Te quamvis italus carmine dixerit
Obscuro ac humili sitam
Vates e mediis aequoribus caput
Tollentem : Charites tamen
Te ornant, Nympha maris. Plurimus advena
Laeto lumine conspicit
Munitam validis aggeribus stupens :
In te non amor artium
Torpet, non Sophiæ : mens bona civium
Fulgetque ingenium sagax.
Ast o tu solvis jam retinacula,
Jam jam tollitur anchora,
Et portum properas impigra linquere.
O salve atque diu vale!
Te semper placidam numina sospitent!
O navis vale, cui datur
Tantum efferre caput! pondus amabile,
Claro nomine praeditum,
Tu fers Gualtherium : Te zephyri leves
Faustis flaminibus ferant.
Sic tu quae mare, forsitan
Quondam nobilior sidera naviges.

THE TABLET.

ON THIS SITE

FROM THE 21ST NOVEMBER TO THE 13TH DECEMBER 1831

SIR WALTER SCOTT

ENAMOURED OF VALLETTA

"THE SPLENDID TOWN QUITE LIKE A DREAM"

RESIDED

IN THE BEVERLEY HOTEL

INTO WHICH

THE PALAZZO BRITTO

HAD BEEN CONVERTED

**QUESTA TAVOLA COMMEMORATIVA
VIEN COLLOCATA DAL GOVERNO AUTONOMO
DI MALTA NEL CENTENARIO DELLA MORTE DI
SIR WALTER SCOTT IL 21 SETTEMBRE 1932.**