

The Maltese Elites and their Obituaries (1815 - c.1900)

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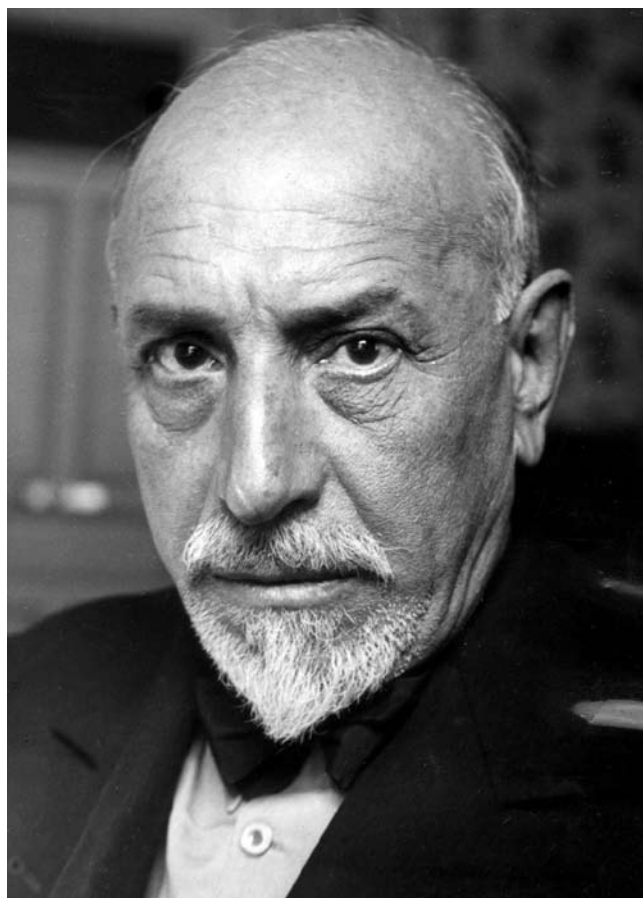
Introduction

The great Sicilian playwright and novelist, Luigi Pirandello has a short story in which the protagonist writes to his dead friend keeping him abreast of the world of the living. It should occur to the dead, he observes, that they list their faults and bad actions. It would then be a good idea to inscribe them on the back of the tombstone to counter the lies commonly carved on the front. In real life, of course, no one would dare do that! Much less would they do that in the obituaries of the dear departed. Nevertheless, a study of obituaries is an intriguing source of historical material. This is particularly so with nineteenth century obits because of their detailed and elaborate character. We can learn something about the dead themselves, those who wrote and read their obits, and their society.

Obituaries go back to at least the early eighteenth century, perhaps even earlier. But their antecedents are much older. Some historians trace obituaries back to (a) monuments or memorials for remembrance of individuals, (b) hagiographies, and (c) pious dispositions in wills.¹

In Malta, obituaries in their modern form first made their appearance in the Malta Government Gazette, the only available newspaper before the grant of freedom of the press (1838). It would, however, take the second half of the century for obituaries to, so to say, come to their full bloom, with more and more details about the deceased, his family, and his or her virtues and values, all dressed in hyperbolic and flowery language.

The authors of obituaries were generally anonymous. But not always. The most renowned was undoubtedly Nicola Zammit (1815-1899), doctor, architect, journalist, artist, and professor of philosophy. Whoever the author, there is a Latin



Sicilian playwright and novelist, Luigi Pirandello.

maxim which has always been followed ... almost. This recites: *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* – nothing but good about the dead. And not only has it been adhered to, but most authors went even further: each individual, whether man or woman, young or old, was the paragon of honesty, piety, patriotism, beauty and innocence.

Consequently, the most striking element in these obituaries is the recurrent use of the superlative. Thus, one Giuseppe (surname not given), a merchant who died in April 1845 is described as an excellent father and the most honest of merchants.² A public broker, Michele Imbroll (d. 13 May 1851) is most loving father,³ and renowned merchant

¹ Bridget Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory*, Routledge, New York & London, 2007: 41-42

² *Malta Times*, 15 Apr. 1845

³ *Mediterraneo*, 28 May 1851

Giuseppe Scicluna (d. 21 Feb. 1852) was most busy, in compensation of which, he was blessed with vast and the most profitable assets.⁴

However, it is in the case of women that the exuberance of the authors in loading the obituaries with superlatives reaches its climax. Extolling the virtue (*virtuosissima*), the affection (*affezionatissima*), the good manners (*maniere squisitissime*), rectitude (*rettissima qual era*) and diligence (*diligentissima*) permeates the obituaries dedicated to women.⁵ In lieu of the superlative, authors sometimes resorted to multiple adjectives to transmit the characteristics of the deceased: Antonietta Stivala (d. Nov. 1887) is described as a woman whose moral integrity, sincerity of heart, beauty and vivacious character rendered her most loved by everyone who knew her.⁶

Hyperbole places a pedestal under the commemorated dead as well as a halo round their head. They stand above the multitude that could (and should) look up to them as the carriers of the real and true virtues of citizenship, patriotism, piety.

Some of the authors, however, could not help inserting some measure of critical assessment, albeit often coated in mild, sugary language. It is, therefore, possible to encounter subtle, and sometimes more obvious criticism of deceased men (but never women). Those who held public office or were otherwise in the public eye were too well known to escape completely unblemished at death. Some warts were bound to show.

None, however, would be the recipient of such criticism, some sarcasm, and a dose of ridicule as one Archbishop. His Grace Count Carmelo Scicluna (1800-1888) was the beneficiary of four articles/obits in the *Risorgimento*.⁷ The first one, published on the very day of his death, was short and expressed sorrow for the passing away of the 'illustrious person.' A second one, a few days later, more an article than an actual obituary



Archbishop Count Carmelo Scicluna (1800-1888), heavily criticised in a leading article of the *Risorgimento*.

(signed Pessimista) refers to his funeral but soon becomes an extended biography. It narrates the circumstances attending his election, his true or fictitious connections with the rich merchant banker Scicluna, the Marquis Emmanuele (1820-1886), and the real or imagined benefits of such relationship. Further, it harps on his impatience at having been made to wait too long for the first papal audience when he just left and went home for lunch, and on his reluctance to allow the setting up of an African missionary centre in Malta. The article critically comments on his unwillingness to sanction the publication of a catholic newspaper. It further recounts Scicluna's reception of Cardinal Lavigerie in underwear while shaving and concludes by mentioning a rumoured will supposed to have provided so many things for the poor that these will be blessing

⁴ id., 25 Feb. 1852

⁵ cf. for example, id., 15 July 1878; 31 July 1878 28 Nov. 1878; 2 Jan. 1879; 24 Dec. 1879, 8 Oct. 1881, but this list hardly exhausts the examples.

⁶ id., 14 Nov. 1887

⁷ *Risorgimento*, 12 July 1888

his memory forever. Two days later more news about the rumoured will are published ... with a vengeance. The whole text was published in the 20 July 1888 issue preceded by a short note stating that the rumoured shower of pious legacies was just that. It was miserly for a man enjoying a colossal fortune. It provided the least possible, the benefits to the poor had merely been a pious wish of the population, nothing else.⁸

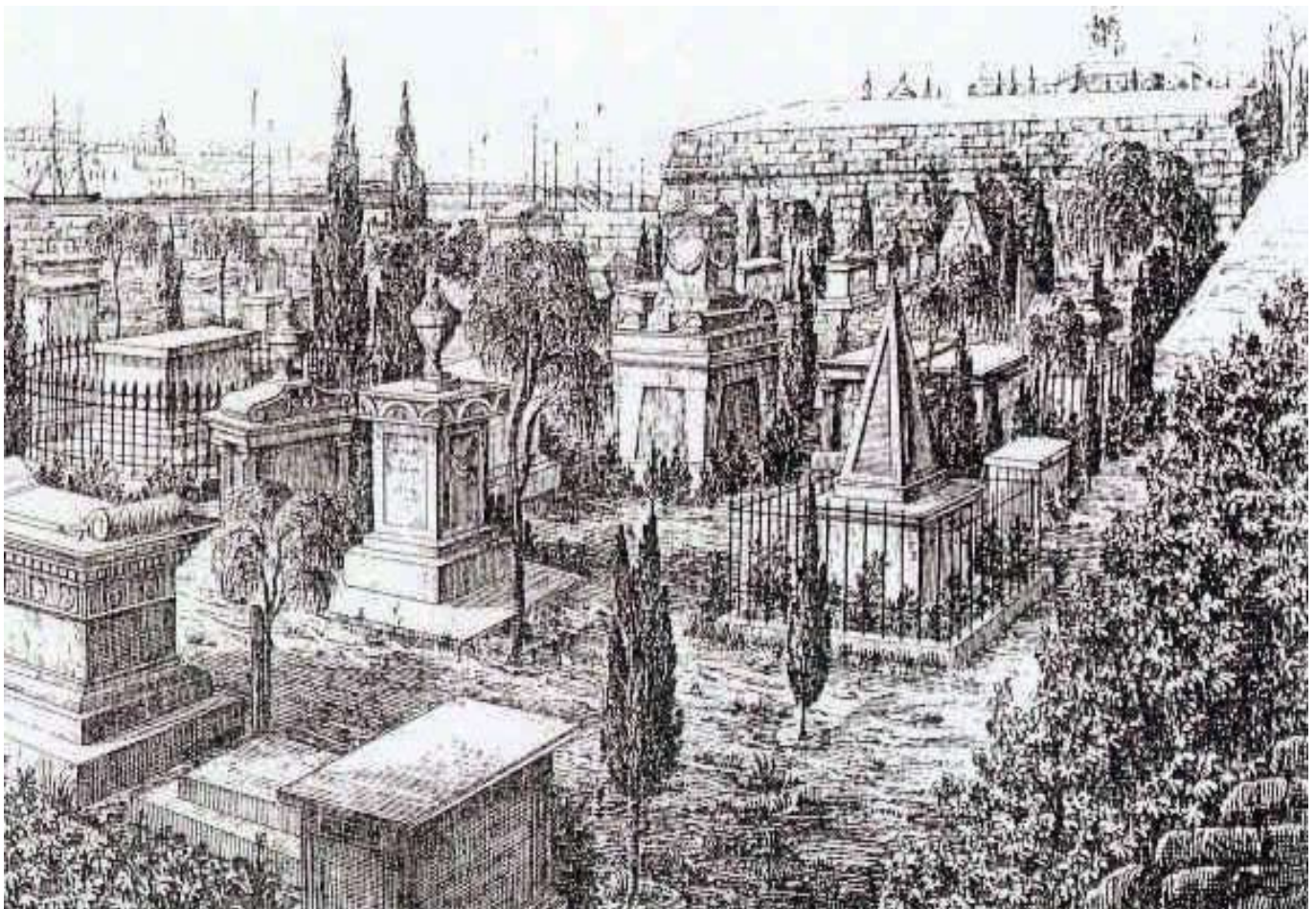
Social Functions of Obituaries

The social function of obituaries seems to have been threefold. They were, first of all, signposts for the community of which the deceased formed part. The virtues, values and qualities attributed to the deceased clearly indicated the characteristics perceived to distance the few from the many. Praise served to validate and entrench those virtues and qualities. Additionally, obituaries

indicated boundaries of identity as well as ‘badges’ confirming membership.

Delimiting the boundaries at the lower end meant ensuring a net distinction from the mass of the people. Once a physical barrier was impossible, another one was necessary. In a small island like Malta, more particularly its urban and suburban centres – Valletta and the Three Cities across the Grand Harbour in particular – the lines of demarcation between the rich and the poor, the elites and their inferiors were often, and necessarily, blurred.

The forces at the upper end were cultural and political rather than physical. The elite we are referring to lived on an island where effective political power was wielded by the colonial power, Great Britain. Despite protestations of loyalty to the British crown, there was always some fissure



Ta' Braxia Cemetery: Burial ground for non-Catholics.

⁸ id., 20 July 1888



Addolorata Cemetery, burial ground for Roman Catholics.

between the upper and middle classes on the one hand, and those with ultimate political power on the other: Roman Catholic versus Protestant, English versus Italian were the recurrent areas of potential conflict which, though hardly ever reaching boiling point, were the recurring undercurrent throughout. Compounded to this was the awareness that the British looked condescendingly, and often with a sense of superiority, on the Maltese. Consequently, there was the necessity to assert superiority if not politically, at least in cultural, moral and ethical terms.

Obituaries were one way of showing loudly and clearly that there was an elite in Malta that could not be confused either with the mass of the population or with the ruling foreigner. In that sense, they were also markers of boundaries.

Clearly, then, the praise heaped upon the deceased was also an indication of those requirements for entry into the class. If the upper and middle classes deemed philanthropy, piety, popularity and paternal (and maternal) qualities as their own constitutive characteristics, so also acceptance within the folds required measurement against them. A civil

servant, a teacher, a bank clerk who advanced in rank, and a monk or a priest who climbed the ecclesiastical ladder and/or was patronised by the better sort of people would be admitted to the fold, and in his turn would be invested with those same self virtues which were the preserve of the better sort of people. Once this was done (and money for publication, and an author, were available), s/he would be regaled with an obituary.

Advertising the death of worthy individuals during the nineteenth century was a common feature in newspapers of the period. Whether it was a leading article as in the case of the more renowned individuals, a normal obituary or just a short death notice it was felt that the departure of a meritorious person needed to be publicly acknowledged. The loss of the individual was a loss for the whole social group. Through the obituary, the deceased, his family and the community of which s/he formed part created a bond which commemorated the individual, elevated the family and strengthened the social bonds within the community. Consequently, anything connected with death whether this is bereavement, the funeral, mourning, or the obituary, renders death both a spectacle and an

affirmation. Within the particular circumstances of nineteenth century Malta this may arguably assume additional relevance because the community which, more than all others, presented candidates for obituaries was in an intermediate position. Hemmed in between the mass of the population on the lower side and the colonial master on the other, the middle and upper classes of local society had, necessarily, a need to assert their identity – and to have it publicised.

Historical Value

What I am trying to show is that beyond their immediate relevance for the contemporary newspaper-reading public, obituaries serve a dual historical function: they provide biographical details of the individual deceased, and they open a window on the characteristics, values and virtues – real or imagined – of particular sections of Maltese society. Additionally, the process of interpretation, the peeling off of the layers of obvious exaggeration and at times hagiography, leads to a better understanding of the society of which they were a feature. It might be true to say that they do constitute a minor clue on our reading of Maltese nineteenth-century society. Nevertheless, it is with such minor clues as the passage of time has left untouched that we are able

to put forward our interpretation of the individuals as well as the times and place which produced them. This is what I am attempting to do.

Like all other primary sources, obituaries have to be handled with care: neither blind belief nor total scepticism should be reserved for them. This is, after all, applicable to all historical sources. It is the hermeneutical process that enables us to propose a vision of nineteenth-century Maltese society which stood on the threshold of modernity, while still embracing the age-old paternalism that is the characteristic of the island colony.

‘Waking the dead’ eschews all connotations connected to the supernatural. However, it is consciously intended to remind us that the dead and the traces they leave behind, if seriously and dispassionately recalled, analysed and interpreted shed light on our explanation and understanding of the living – us.

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