

Book: Slavery, Malta at the Crossroads. Transshipment of Slaves in a British Colony during the Nineteenth Century

Michael Refalo

Malta: BDL Publications (2015); 290 pages

ISBN 9789995746650

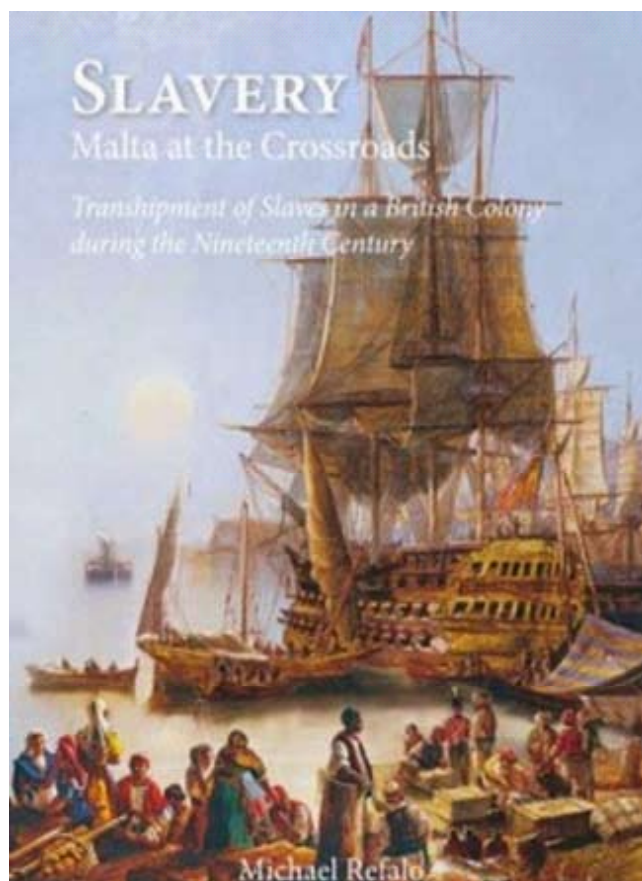
REVIEWED BY LINO BRIGUGLIO

By the end of the 18th century, repugnance of slave dealing was slowly and gradually seeping through mentalities, at least in Britain. This was not enough to end slave dealing, much less slavery itself. However, the seeds had been planted and philanthropists could aspire to a time when the subjection of human beings by their similar would finally be abolished. In 1806, finally, the British Parliament prohibited British participation in the slave trade and five years later made slave dealing a crime equivalent to piracy. Then, in 1833, slaves were emancipated throughout most of the British Empire.

In Malta, a British possession, slavery had been abolished during the short French period and was confirmed by the new coloniser. Nevertheless, the Mediterranean island's predicament was dependent not only upon its colonial status but also on its geographical position.

As Refalo's book illustrates, Malta's contiguity to the North African coast and the persistence of slavery and slave dealing in the Ottoman Empire, meant that the island's connection with slavery would not end by simple legislative enactment. In addition, the popularity of Cyrenaica and other North African Ottoman territories as a land for emigration and commerce, rendered slave ownership and slave dealing a familiar phenomenon for those Maltese who lived, worked or traded there. Thus, it is no surprise that, as the first chapter of the book illustrates, merchants like the Balbi brothers and Gio Andrea Debono would be tainted with suspicion of slave dealing.

Two chapters of the book examine in detail the triangular relationship between Malta's colonial administration, the Colonial Office and British consuls and other representatives in the Levant as these sought to grapple with the problem. Whereas consuls in Istanbul and Izmir sought to blame



the port authorities in Malta for allowing African slaves to be shipped from Tripoli to the Levant via Malta's Grand Harbour, the Malta governor did his best to exculpate his subalterns from accusations of negligence or connivance. The Colonial Office was placed in the embarrassing position of trying to solve the problem without harming the British Empire's political and commercial interests in the Mediterranean. The result, as the book shows, was that no concrete action could be taken. And this despite the fact that Malta's Crown Advocate, Adrian Dingli, proposed – twice – the promulgation of an Ordinance to solve the problem.

A chapter of the book discusses a little known incident: the involvement of the United States in the matter. Michel Vidal, American consul in Tripoli, sought to tarnish British reputation by imputing

to the authorities in Malta the blame of tolerating the passage of slaves through the island. Vidal's ultimate aim, one that must have had some backing in Washington, was to secure an American base on the north African coast. That Vidal's mission came to nothing did not diminish the frustration of the Maltese police, of the governor, and of the Colonial Office.

The final two chapters of the book are devoted to the slaves and their owners. The journey of the former from the heart of Africa until they reached Tripoli is referred to only briefly, this being the subject of numerous works on the matter. It is from the point of arrival at Tripoli to their arrival in Valletta, and their subsequent transshipment to the Levantine ports that is discussed in some detail. Even the slave owners get their share: these were not professional slave dealers. Rather, they were mostly Turkish officials seeking to make some extra money by purchasing slaves in Tripoli with a view to selling them in

Istanbul or Izmir. As Chapter 6 of the book shows, both slaves and slave owners wove a web of lies which enabled the owners to escape prosecution (attempted once without success) and the slaves themselves to hope for a better future.

The subject of the book may seem peripheral in the greater problem of Ottoman slavery. Most of the 19th century slave dealing was carried out further to the east from Malta. Nevertheless, the book is an example of problems relating to Ottoman slavery. Throughout the Turkish Empire slavery went on until, at least, the first decades of the 20th century. The argument sustaining it was that their slavery was different, that the opportunities available for emancipation and advancement were not comparable to slavery in the Americas. Further, the book shows how political and commercial interests took precedence over humanitarian sentiments. In that sense, the past offers a reflection on the present when the refugee problem dogs the governments of Europe.

Book: Profili ta' kittieba Ghawdxin

Joe M. Attard

Malta: BDL Publications (2014); 260 pages
ISBN 9789993274926

REVIEWED BY MAURICE CAUCHI

A recently published book: *Profili ta' Kittieba Ghawdxin*, (2014) ['Profiles of Gozitan writers'] by Joe M. Attard provides a welcome addition to publications which help to highlight the literary output in these islands, and in Gozo in particular.

The author is a well-known author and journalist and needs no introduction. He is very qualified to undertake the job of collecting information and writing about Gozitan authors. This is a collection of 54 writers, classified chronologically, starting with Mgr Luigi Vella (born 1859) and ending with Pierre J. Meylak, (1982), thus covering a period of over a century.

As Attard emphasises in the introduction to this work, this anthology is not complete, and in a work

of this nature it is quite possible for some authors to be missed or omitted for various reasons.

One must emphasise at the outset that this book is not about writers in general, but only 'literary' writers, i.e. those interested in publishing in Maltese language, prose or poetry. In some instances works of a more religious nature have featured prominently in some authors. Omitted from this collection are writers whose interest was not specifically linked to Maltese literature.

Professor Charles Briffa in his introduction to this book emphasizes that this is not a genre of writing distinct from that of other national writers. He says: "Although the writer talks about 'Gozitan Writers', this does not mean that there is some regional literature which is cut off from local culture, because Gozitan writers also reflect something

which is national in its character... writings from Gozo add to the national identity because they add other aspects to the national understanding in a language which is spoken by everyone in the Maltese Islands.' [my translation].

A review of personal characteristics and background of the individuals included here may throw some light on the various stimuli which push one to take up pen and paper and start writing. One sees for instance that the majority of writers (61%) hail from Victoria – this is a much higher proportion than would be expected simply on a per capita basis: the population of Victoria is no more than 17% of the total Gozo population.

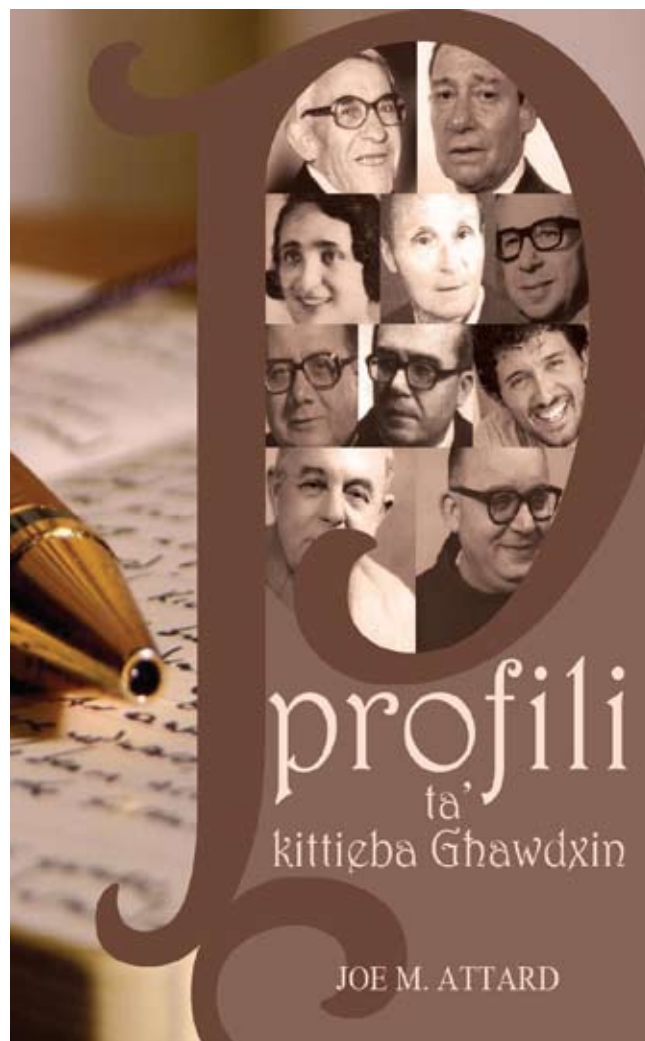
The representation of writers from the various villages is as follows: Xaghra (5). Qala (4), Sannat and Xewkija (3 each), and one from each of the following villages (San Lawrenz, Għajnsielem, Żebbuġ, Kerċem, Għarb and Munxar).

It is obvious that if one is interested in promoting the production of Maltese writing in these genres, then it would be important to find out why villagers are not interested or stimulated enough to embark on the production of Maltese literature.

Another interesting statistic is the high proportion of priests among Gozitan writers, which amounts to 37% of the total, obviously well out of proportion of the relative number of priests in the community. It is well known of course that in the past, the priests constituted a very substantial proportion of the educated public. But this is certainly not the case anymore and cannot explain the discrepancy noted here.

And perhaps the most damning statistic is the almost complete absence of women included in this group: only one woman managed to get in! Included in this publication we find Laurent Ropa who left the Islands when he was only two years old, and as far as I know has never written a word in Maltese. We also find Dun Ġużepp Cauchi who as the author says, 'has written a lot but never published anything in his lifetime'.

We have also a couple of authors from the Diaspora, namely Joe Axiaq from Melbourne, as well as a more recent recruit, Pierre J Mejlak, now



resident in Brussels. Arguably, there are many more Gozitan writers overseas who have not made it into this book.

The author should be congratulated on producing this book that highlights the work of Gozitan authors, and which might hopefully encourage others to follow on these tracks.

Book: The Rotunda. A Testament to Faith, Courage and Love

Ted M. Mizzi

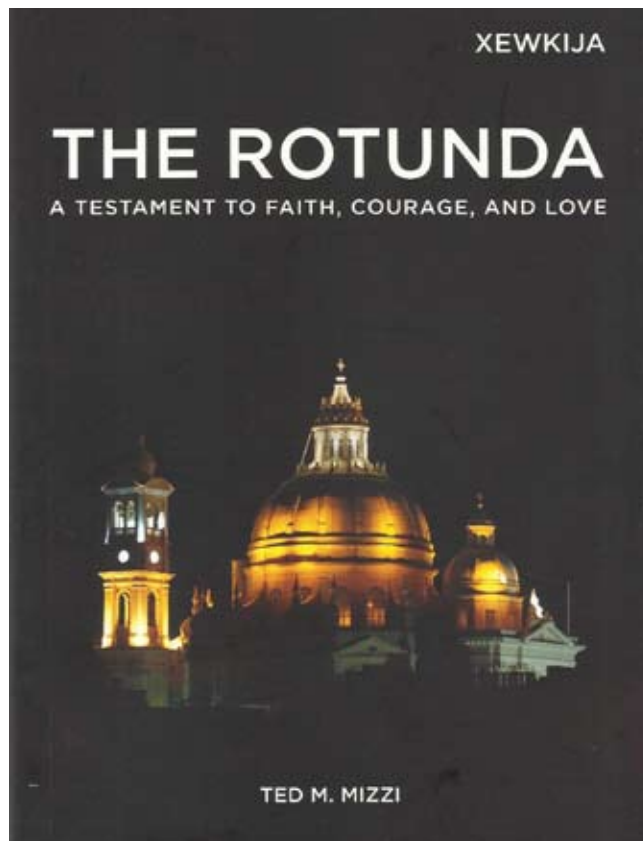
Malta: Progress Press (2015); 164 pages.

REVIEWED BY GEOFFREY G. ATTARD

Nemo me impune lacessit - No one attacks me with impunity. Few Scotsmen would not be aware that this Latin dictum is in fact the motto of the Most Noble Order of the Thistle and by association, of Scotland at large. However I imagine that fewer would be the *Xewkin* who would not be aware that their native village of old, shares the same motto with this North European country. Although there is no direct link between the two, tradition has it that the land where Xewkija now stands once abounded with thistles. Legend or hearsay may have a share in the formation of history but Ted M. Mizzi's masterpiece *The Rotunda. A Testament to Faith, Courage and Love* leaves both behind and delves deep into unearthing important documents and bringing together important facts that form the rich history of this most ancient village of the island of Gozo.

The first attempt for a history of Xewkija takes us back to 1978, the year that commemorated the three centuries since the foundation of the parish. Six *Xewkin* got together to write an outline of the history of the village of St John the Baptist which was given the status of parish by Bishop Girolamo Molina in November 1679. A year earlier, the periodical *Gourgion* was inaugurated with the aim of addressing the history of the village. This renaissance served its purpose well; since then, various publications – even if some of them minute – came to light, studying some particular aspect or other of the village. Ted M. Mizzi's is a monumental contribution to what I would call the aesthetic history of Xewkija. In his book, full of original pictures, most of which feature in book-form for the first time, Ted M. Mizzi, who stems from one of the prominent families of Xewkija, outlines the long but glorious journey of the building of the Xewkija Rotunda, which boasts one of the highest domes in the world.

The sense of patriotic love, sacrifice and endurance, that characterised parish priest Dun Ġuzepp Grech and his fellow parishioners during the ordeal that began in the fifties only to end in the late seventies,



is the theme of the publication. Good will could not by itself be the only ingredient for such a big feat; perseverance during hard times and undying love and dedication for one's own village and community were the human strengths that empowered the *Xewkin* of a couple of generations ago to take up the challenge of such an ambitious project. The vivacity by which the author describes the various episodes that knit together the history of the Xewkija Rotunda makes for interesting reading. When I opened the book and read Dr Godfrey Baldacchino's foreword and proceeded to the first chapters, I knew I would not put the book away before having read it entirely.

Max Xuereb's sumptuous photos make the book so presentable that I only wish it could have been published as a coffee-table publication.

Ted M. Mizzi's *The Rotunda* is not only a testament to faith, courage and love; it is a testament of a one man's love for his own native village, a strong expression of patriotism that does not render the term either archaic or out-of-place but rather effective and noble.