

Edward Lear in Gozo in March 1866 – 150 years ago

JOHN CREMONA

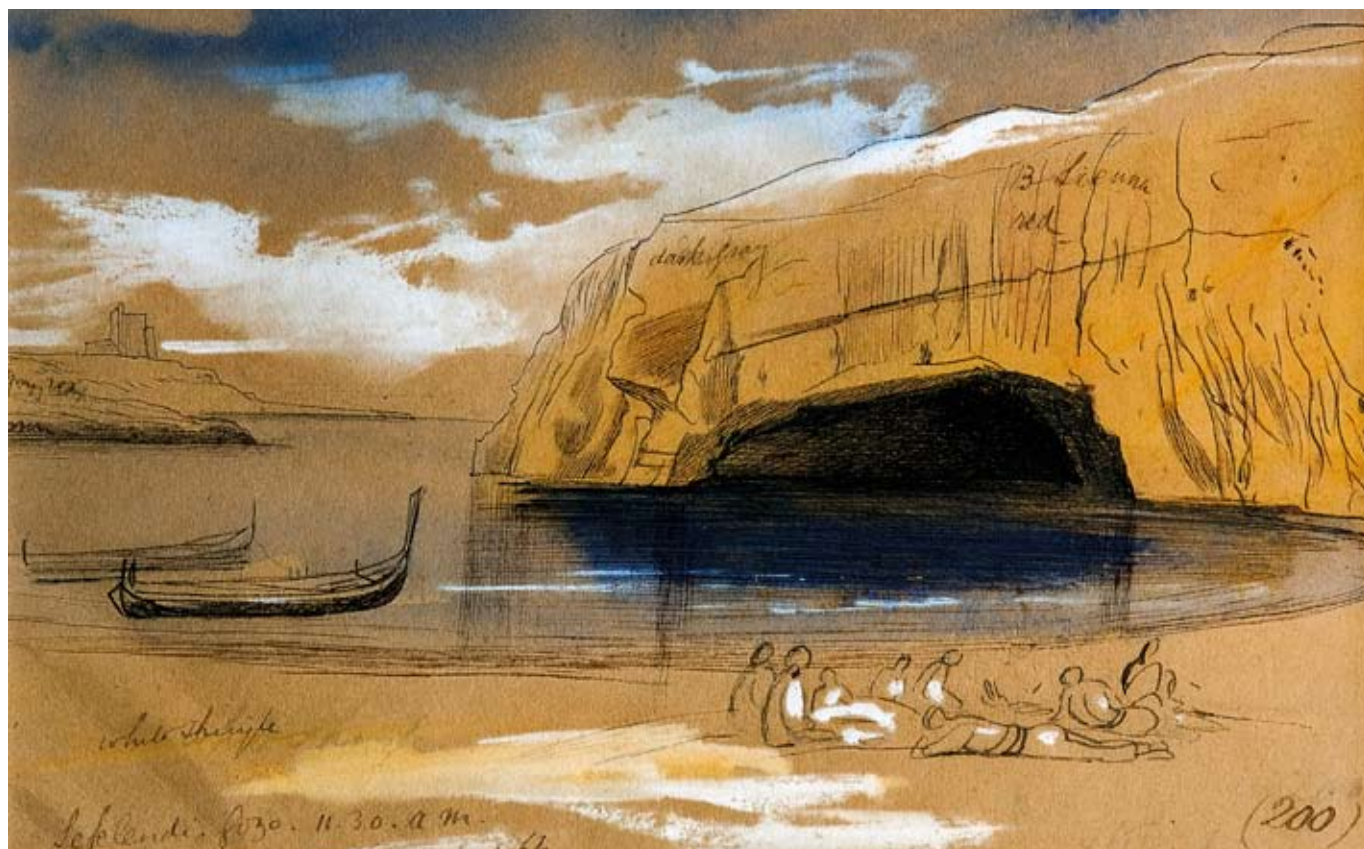
During this year 2016, we shall be commemorating the visit to Gozo of one of the greatest artists of international fame who ever set foot on the island, Edward Lear, who lived between 1812 and 1888. A pioneer on the study and research on Edward Lear and his visits to Malta and Gozo is Joe Attard Tabone.

During a conference held between the 12th and 15th July 2013 at the University of Aston in Birmingham UK, Attard Tabone delivered a lecture about the eight day visit of Edward Lear to Gozo in March 1866. The papers read during this conference were recently (2015) published by Oxbow Books in a book entitled *'Every traveller needs a compass'*. This conference is organised every two years by ASTENE (Association for the study of Travel in Egypt and the Near East).

Joe Attard Tabone is a well known personality in Malta and Gozo as a scholar and researcher of

various topics including archaeology, history, art and ornithology. One can safely say that he was a pioneer in various fields of study and he carried out research and studies in libraries, archives and institutions all over the World. Without doubt, Joe Attard Tabone will be remembered for the re-discovery and protection of a number of archaeological sites in Gozo including the Xaghra Circle (Brockdorff Circle) and the prehistoric hut at Ghajnsielem, just to mention two examples. For his efforts in the field of antiquities, on 10th December 2015, Joe Attard Tabone was elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. This prestigious Society is housed in Burlington House on Piccadilly and was founded in 1707 making it Britain's oldest heritage organisation.

In our age one may carry out extensive research from the comfort of one's own home and with the aid of the internet one can carry out research in libraries and archives around the world. But before



Watercolour of Xlendi Bay, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta. Courtesy Heritage Malta.

the advent of the internet, Joe Attard Tabone visited many countries abroad and spent most of his time leafing through voluminous records in libraries and archives.

In the above mentioned paper, the author gives a detailed day by day account of the short eight day visit of Lear to Gozo in March 1866, during which Lear managed to produce no less than eighty watercolours of various places in Gozo. These watercolours are now prized possessions of museums, libraries and even private individuals around the World.

From the diary notes left by Lear of his sojourn on Gozo, we gain invaluable information regarding the social situation in Gozo one hundred and fifty years ago, the weather conditions, traditions, food, people as well as on the accommodation and hospitality offered to the first tourists to Gozo.

Apart from being a famous artist, Lear was also a good writer and therefore his description of Gozo does not lack the artistic touch. Notwithstanding the fact that the days spent on Gozo were characterised by strong winds which bothered Lear and his servant Giorgio Kokali during their long walks in the Gozitan countryside, Lear recounts that they walked between fifteen and twenty miles every day. The first impression of Gozo taken on his arrival on the island, even though he had to walk from Mġarr to Rabat, was that *“Gozo is evidently full of picturesque views, the hills being so well drawn and separate. Rabato.....is like Athens – really immensely beautiful in its way”*.

On the same subject, Joe Attard Tabone also delivered a lecture at the Conference Hall of the



Watercolour of Fungus Rock, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta. Courtesy Heritage Malta.



Mr Joe Attard Tabone being admitted Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London by the Society President Dr Jill Andrews.

Ministry for Gozo in December 2012 and on that same occasion a small exhibition was set up, that included six original watercolour views of Gozo by Lear. The National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta has seven watercolours by Edward Lear, four of which depict Gozo subjects. Other views of Gozo by Lear are to be found in private collections in Gozo and Malta as well as in museums and libraries all over the world.

One of the watercolours left by Lear of Gozo is the one depicting the cave at Xlendi Bay that is to be found in the collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta. Lear was so fascinated by the views offered by this spectacular inlet that he spent more than two hours producing watercolours of different views of the bay. This watercolour was drawn by Lear on 20th March 1866 at 11.30am.

Lear is renowned for the letter he wrote to Lady Waldegrave on 13th April 1866 where he writes: *“Did I tell you of my visit to Oudesch, vulgarly called Gozo? It was a most pleasant one, and with the help of Giorgio I drew every bit of it, walking fifteen or twenty miles a day. Its coast scenery may truly be called pomskezillious and gromphibberous, being as no words can describe its magnificence”*.

John Cremona has been involved in a number of cultural heritage initiatives with special reference to Gozo and has set on a number of boards and committees related to cultural heritage. Currently he is the Project Leader of the Cittadella restoration and rehabilitation project. He has published various articles related to Gozo.