

DUSTY VOLUMES TO DIGITAL: VALLETTA'S MEMORY INSTITUTIONS AS CULTURAL SPACES

WILLIAM ZAMMIT
University of Malta

Much of Malta's written depositories of national memory are to be found within the island's capital, Valletta. An impressive variety of such institutions, varying from public to private ones, house printed works and manuscript and archival material which goes well beyond the island's own history, being of considerable significance within the wider Mediterranean and European contexts. The extent to which such collections are accessible, their facility of use and possible ways ahead where their further development is concerned are delved into. Of particular importance is the need to democratize access to such material, making it more known to local and foreign academics, but also more relevant to a much wider audience to who are financially sustaining it and to whom much of it belongs as national heritage.

The role of libraries, archives and of related written memory institutions has evolved from an original inception of storehouses – indeed strong-rooms – where the cumulative written output in the form of factual knowledge, opinion and ideas as well as literary productions was jealously amassed, guarded and preserved. It has even been perceived as yet another tool through which the ruler, religions and the privileged classes have historically both justified and practised social control. The slow and gradual process of democratisation in Western societies, beginning from the early-modern period, was itself partly the result of increasing literacy and accessibility to written opinion and debate. It was eventually to result in demands for the setting up of truly national memory institutions to which citizens could be granted access. Royal libraries and archives were transformed into national institutions, often also incorporating vast collections formerly belonging to privileged entities or individuals.¹

What may aptly be described as the third stage in this transitional process is now being reached, though it is by no means complete. In the last twenty years or so technology has been rapidly and very effectively dismantling any residual notions of exclusive cultural ownership of written heritage. The concept of national ownership has now been considerably diluted into one of custody and dissemination. This carries ethical implications relating to best practices where conservation and dissemination are concerned, ensuring as wide an access as possible on both national and international levels (Preer 2008). Online searchable catalogues and the digital uploading of texts constitute the concrete application of technology in this respect and further rapid developments are expected. While physically located and cared for in a specific geographical area, written memory recognised as universal cultural heritage, should be, by right, made accessible to all of humanity.²

Access to written heritage varies in degree and intensity from one cultural reality to another. Emphasis upon available resources to integrate such written heritage within the country's formal education setups is a fundamental future investment. A national well-

structured cultural policy, sustaining cultural awareness can hardly be achieved without access to, and familiarity with, one's written cultural heritage. This is particularly crucial when – as in the Maltese case – available written heritage more often than not has significance far beyond the island's own shores. The latest Malta national cultural policy document indicates a variety of future directions in this respect, without taking into consideration the dynamics of specific cultural institutions (National Cultural Policy 2011).

A Case-Study from Malta: Valletta's written Memory Institutions

It is within this context that a discussion of the evolving situations and roles of Valletta's libraries and archives may be conducted. The issues facing them are, by and large, similar to those challenging most of the other repositories of written memory in Malta and indeed in the less financially prosperous countries of Europe. The variety of means through which such present challenges may be addressed – and which are discussed below – lend themselves to a wider applicability well beyond Valletta's walls. The written memory held by Valletta's institutions is closely connected to European culture and history. As such, it is indispensable that these feature prominently in the projects for Valletta European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2018. A recent example of the type of project that may be envisaged is *Riga Digitalis*. This consists of a public digital library comprising newspapers, magazines, calendars, old postcards and historical address books related to Riga's history, which was inaugurated during Riga's tenure as ECoC in 2014.

Valletta, a 13th century walled city with a population of around 7,000 and an area of under one square kilometre, may be described as the micro-capital of the smallest member of the European Union. Throughout history, the geographical location of Malta right at the crossroads of the Mediterranean has bestowed a complex political and cultural role on the islands. The island-colony was integrated within the European political and cultural fold since the 13th century. The presence of the Sovereign Military Order of St John on the island between 1530 and 1798 resulted in the construction of a planned capital city brimming with a diversity of culturally-significant manifestations. Foremost among these are Valletta's written memory institutions, both those under state or private custody, curating material of very considerable cultural worth within the Maltese and international contexts (Valletta Action Plan 2009).

Valletta's Public Memory Institutions: Historical Development and Present Realities

Valletta's public memory institutions have been criticised as being closed repositories. The process of democratisation and of reaching out has been described as gradual, at times hesitant and one generally lagging behind in comparison with that taking place in other institutions of national importance. Having inherently rich collections is, however, an enviable start and contains the potential for exciting projects that utilise memory for cultural and indeed economic growth. The opening up of such collections on a national and international scale should feature prominently in Malta's cultural agenda, especially within the context of Valletta as Capital of Culture. This is admittedly the situation that similar countries with a long history but short purse-strings and a traditional pedagogical infrastructure have to address. Here indeed lies Valletta's predicament in this respect: an exceptionally rich tiny capital curating some outstanding written collections of world importance but that have been, as yet, accessible only to an elite academia whose own use of them, in turn, has generally been targeted exclusively for a similarly restricted audience.

Pride of place as Valletta's foremost written memory institution is the National Library of Malta (NLM). As the legally-appointed guardian of Melitensia, (Malta-related published material), the National Library needs to be discussed in view of its traditional role and its present capability to fulfil what are increasingly considered to be essential national library responsibilities and deliverables (Malta Libraries Act 2011). The Maltese situation may aptly be described as that of a young nation with a potentially outstanding but ageing national library. Set up in 1760 as a *Biblioteca Pubblica*, or Public Library, the Malta National Library is the oldest one in the British Commonwealth. As in the case of so many other long-established libraries, this landmark Maltese cultural institution has assumed different functions over the centuries. The library originated from the amalgamation of various collections, notably those belonging to Cardinal Portocarrero and the Balí de Tencin. Books inherited by the Order of St John from deceased members were regularly added to the collection between the 1760s down to the expulsion of the Order in 1798. As such, although the collection contained a number of Melitensia publications practically from the very start, this content was purely accidental and the bulk of the material bore no relation to Malta whatsoever. By 1798, besides a collection numbering some 80,000 volumes, the library also contained a collection of antiquities and of scientific and mathematical instruments (Zammit 2005). It hence fulfilled the role of both library and museum, as, after all, was standard practice in most European libraries during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Following the politically unsettled period between 1798 and 1800, the library was, in 1812, transferred to the current building that was specifically built for the purpose during the last decades of the 18th century.

During the early nineteenth century the library also assumed a lending role besides its original reference function (*Regolamenti* 1804). It was only in 1974, with the setting up of the Lending Library at Floriana, that the library eventually shed off its lending function. Printed matter in English started to find its way in the collection early during British rule. This consisted of material of a literary and scientific nature, as well as the more established British newspapers and periodicals, official literature and the Hansard parliamentary debates. A further related development took place in 1838 when the library assumed the additional role of university library, the latter being then situated a few streets away. This arrangement lasted until 1842 (Cassar Pullicino 1959).

The first albeit indirect step towards the promulgation of legislation to enhance the Melitensia content of the Library's collection came in 1888, with the passing of an ordinance which made the deposit of published material mandatory in exchange for copyright protection. The deposit was, however, purely voluntary. The 1888 ordinance specifically excluded newspapers, annual reports and leaflets (Ordinance II 1888). In 1903, with the setting up of the Malta Museum, the library's collection of antiquities was finally transferred elsewhere and hence its curatorial role came to an end. It was only in 1925 that the library acquired the right of legal deposit over certain types of local publications (Act II 1925). The 1925 Act was amended by the 1937 ordinance (Ordinance XIV 1937) which was, in turn, subsequently fine-tuned a number of times down to 2011. It was also in 1937 that the library, by then officially known as the Royal Malta Library, assumed, due the lack of a national archive, the role of archival repository with the transfer of the Archive of the Order of St John from the Public Registry to the library. In 1976, the library was officially designated as 'The National Library of Malta'. The end-result of its historical development has been an institution, the collection of which consists of a hybrid of print, manuscript and some very limited audio and visual

material, much of which bears no direct relation to Malta. It includes a Melitensia collection which is far from being in any way complete.

The present Malta National Library collection and its ability to truly function as a 'National Library' in the strict sense of the term reflects its past, as briefly outlined above. Even after more than eighty years of legal deposit legislation, the majority of the printed collection does not consist of Melitensia, but of 15th to 19th century works acquired during the time of the Hospitaller Knights and the subsequent British rule. Much of this material consists of rare works which many other prestigious collections dream of possessing; however the fact remains that the National Library's limited resources and perceived function is necessarily conditioned by the reality that a very considerable part of its collection both in terms of quantity and significance cannot be described as 'national'. While this fact admittedly presents some considerable challenges where financial and human resources are concerned, it gives the collection a most impressive European dimension, possibly one of the most significant in any national library in Europe.

This is indeed a major challenge which the National Library has had to live with since the switch over from 'public' to 'national' library status took place. Thus, limited – indeed downright derisory – resources have also to cater for the preservation, cataloguing and accommodation of this non-Maltese material. Obviously, the transfer of such material from the National collection is inconceivable: notwithstanding the fact that it is not Melitensia, much of it still makes up an important, even if mostly unstudied part of national and international cultural and intellectual history. Conceivably, this material may be included within the National Library's collection development policy as a special collection in its own right. This dual role is something few modern national libraries have to face, at least not to the same extent. The older national libraries which do have to address this issue are generally to be found in countries where both cultural appreciation and financial resources are more abundant.

A major issue which needs urgent attention is that of ensuring that as much of the national published output as possible does actually find its way into the collection. This is indeed the primary expectation of any national library. Issues of space, but also of logistics, resources and perhaps attitude still prevent the library from ensuring the creation and upkeep of a truly comprehensive collection of Melitensia. Besides on-going gaps in the printed matter collection and in published off-line electronic resources, no digital publications as yet form part of the collection, even though these are now covered by legal deposit legislation. Meanwhile, 'non-Malta' material has, in turn, received considerably less attention, certainly well below its cultural and monetary value. Rare early European and Middle Eastern editions in the collection remain mostly unknown and unstudied, as is also the case with much of the non-Malta-related manuscript material accumulated during the library's long history. While such material presents considerable challenges in areas such as conservation, cataloguing and housing among others, it also provides opportunities for a variety of international research projects.

Equally crucial and particularly required as a pre-requisite for any digitisation initiative, the collection cries out for a re-cataloguing. The vast majority of the material is still only accessible through traditional sheaf or card catalogues, the completeness and accuracy of which is doubtful. Current metadata practices and the availability of an online catalogue constitute ambitious, yet indispensable projects if Malta's National Library is to be made truly accessible in a digital age.

Despite the setting up of the National Archives of Malta in 1989, the National Library still remains to this day the guardian of what are probably the most internationally prestigious and utilised local archival collection, namely the Archive of the Order of Malta (AOM). Besides, the library also houses the archive of the Maltese *Universitas*, or municipal authorities (UNIV), covering the 14th to early 19th centuries. Together these two collections comprise some eight thousand volumes, with the earliest material going back to the early twelfth century (Camilleri 2002). The issue as to whether such archival material should be transferred to the Malta National Archive is debatable: such a transfer would put both archival collections in their 'rightful' place, while it would also release scarce National Library resources to be devoted to the development of its Melitensia collection. Equally strong arguments militate against such a transfer. Both archives have now become part and parcel of the National Library and their transfer may adversely affect the library's status with researchers. Perhaps more practical considerations are the convenience of Valletta over the placement of the National Archives (Rabat), and the fact that the National Archive has its own problems of lack of space and of human and financial resources.

This situation, coupled with other factors, has made it particularly challenging for the National Library to fulfil its primary function, namely the preservation and accessibility of the national published literary heritage in the broad sense of the term. As already mentioned, the problem in this regard is twofold: the absence of Melitensia material from the collection and that of adequate bibliographic Melitensia tools. The formulation of a sound definition of what constitutes the latter seems to be the best starting-point to address both issues.

The electronic duplication of major parts of the National Library's collection, namely the AOM and the library's extensive collection of Maltese newspapers, has taken the form of an ambitious microfilming project financed the Malta Study Centre within the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library of St John's University, Minnesota (HMML) and mostly carried out during the 1980s and 90s.³ While positive, this development – which also necessitated the creation of the required metadata – has yet to reach its full fruition by having the microfilms transferred on to digital format and made electronically accessible. Currently, users still have to physically visit the library and, in the case of newspapers, consultation has to be made only through the microfilms on a handful of microfilm readers that are obsolete and inefficacious.

At present a number of initiatives in this regard are reaching fruition stage. The National Library's DigiVault project is about to be launched, and will provide digital accessibility to the Maltese newspapers collection (Mamo 2015). The library has also completed the metadata collation and the actual digitization of its numerically modest but internationally significant collection of incunabula, first described in detail by Mauro Inguanez (1954). Once these are made available online they will constitute an important contribution towards research in Malta and beyond. Similar digital initiatives such as that taken by the National Statistics Office with regards to the *Malta Blue Books* has already proved its worth.⁴

While a number of the capital's national institutional archival collections have been, or are in the process of, being transferred outside Valletta to be integrated within Malta's National Archives, a number of other culturally significant collections remain within the capital and there is currently no intention to have them transferred outside the city. Archival fonds which have been or are being presently transferred outside Valletta include that of the central British colonial administration of the island. Formerly known

as the 'Palace Archive', it was transferred to Rabat, Malta to form the nucleus of the newly-established National Archives of Malta in 1989. The Courts of Law archives, down to 1900 are similarly being transferred, to be added to that covering the period 1530–1798 that had also formed part of the core National Archives collection.

Archives that are still held in Valletta comprise some of the fundamentally important fonds, and their retention in Valletta – albeit in an all-round improved physical environment – makes sense both for users as well as not to diminish the capital's cultural heritage and appeal. Foremost among these fonds are the Notarial Archive and those pertaining to the Public Registry. The potential exploitation for family history research is discussed below.

Following decades of neglect, the Notarial Archive situated in St Christopher Street has witnessed nothing short of a Renaissance during the past decade or so. From what has aptly been described as 'Malta's National Monument of Shame' (*Malta Today* 2013), the archive is being saved from destruction through a strategic action plan. Consisting of some 20,000 volumes, the archive constitutes a veritable treasure trove of primary source documentation, covering all aspects of Maltese, Southern European and Mediterranean history and cultural cross-currents from the 15th to the 19th centuries. Among the numerous documentation of inestimable importance is the earliest-known piece of literature in Maltese, dating from the fifteenth century. The archival fond is being currently assessed, organised and cleaned from the 70 year-old debris of the Second World War.

This on-going project constitutes an admirable case-study of what can be achieved through citizen interest and commitment. The initiative to take concrete action and save what is arguably the largest and most culturally significant archive in Valletta was undertaken through the unstinted efforts of Dr Joan Abela. A Notarial Archives Resource Council (NARC) was subsequently created to run and coordinate the entire project. A well-run public relations exercise, serious and sustained commitment from the volunteers and an increased public awareness of cultural heritage has resulted in a steady flow of financial and human resources for this certainly ambitious project. Beyond saving a major memory institution from oblivion and certain destruction, the NARC, through the use of volunteers and outreach programmes is proving equally effective in raising awareness of the existence and research potential of what until a few years ago constituted yet another 'cemetery of old and forgotten records' (Vella 1971: 127).

As in the case of practically all other written memory institutions in Valletta and throughout Malta, the archive still requires the setting up of an up-to-date research infrastructure. The detailed description of the volumes, involving metadata gathering and the creation of online search facilities cannot, in this particular example, be undertaken before the preliminary spade work as described above has been more or less completed. Together with the archive of the Order of St John, the Notarial archive carries vast potential for research programmes focusing on the Mediterranean and Southern Europe.

Valletta's Private Memory Institutions

Private libraries and archives in Valletta consist mainly of two types, namely those belonging to religious and lay institutions and others in possession of families or individuals. In both instances, access is generally limited to those who have the right contacts. The contents of such collections remain virtually unknown, undescribed and generally

unexplored, at times even by the institutions who own them. Even less is usually known about conservation issues related to such material. A formidable barrier in this particular instance has traditionally been an aura of secrecy motivated by fears of exposing the financial worth of such material in private hands. The various parish churches and religious orders in Valletta all hold archival and printed material of considerable importance which, at the very least, should be recorded and digitised.

Collections pertaining to families and individuals have generally been made more accessible at least to the professional researchers. Generally belonging to Maltese noble families or others with a long-standing history, they usually contain either family material and/or specialised collections built over decades, if not centuries of patient and careful collecting. The collections of Malta-related manuscript and printed material held by local notables such as Giovanni Bonello, Nicholas De Piro and Albert Ganado are perhaps the best-known examples in this regard. They often comprise collections of published Melitensia material, including ephemera of which no copies are known in the National Library itself but which are crucial for research in social history.

Creating a professionally-run and trusted National Library setup would definitely go a long way towards having such material eventually passed over to the national collection, particularly in cases where the heirs of such material do not share its erstwhile owner's passion for it. State incentives in the form of tax rebates and other forms of national recognition need to be explored, as incentives for the donation of such material. Permanent loan models offer another option which has been as yet underutilised in the local cultural context. Thus, for example, the recent permanent loan of the late Victor G. Griffiths' fossil and molluscs to the National Museum of Natural History in Mdina.

A successful example of the possibilities in this respect has been the passing over of the Albert Ganado cartographic collection in 2008. The collection consists of over 450 printed and manuscript maps and plans of the Maltese islands produced between the early sixteenth and late nineteenth centuries; it is the most extensive one of its nature. It was created as a labour of love over a long period of time by a Maltese lawyer, Albert Ganado. An agreement was reached with the Maltese government for the collection's ownership by the state and its transfer to the National Museum of Fine Arts in South Street, Valletta. This recent development has been the most significant one where the acquisition of Melitensia by a Maltese public institution is concerned. The agreement is a good example of how such unique material may be added to the national collections and not sold away and very possibly scattered in local and foreign collections. The acquisition of the collection was preceded by the detailed cataloguing of every individual item, and this data was also passed over with the collection.

Following the collection's acquisition it was professionally cared for from a conservation point of view. While currently, logistical considerations allow only for limited physical accessibility to the collection, the ambitious MUŻA (*Mużew Nazzjonali tal-Arti*) project currently being completed would allow for much greater public access, while ensuring its preservation. The interactive project would be a first for Malta and has been described as 'a flagship project that is structured on the concept of community curatorship: MUŻA will be ground-breaking for Malta not only because its exhibits will form part of a story, but also because this story itself will be narrated in terms of content by the community' (www.heritagemalta.org). The retaining of Ganado cartographic material as a separate

collection bearing its original owner's name serves as a further motivation for collectors to reach similar arrangements for their painstakingly-built collections.

Valletta 2018 and Potential Ways Ahead

The opportunity offered by Valletta's successful candidature as ECoC for 2018 thus needs to be strategically exploited with regards to the various aspects of the city's public and private collections of written memory. A strong case for practical and sustained initiatives that go beyond what is being currently undertaken is definitely called for.

Preserving the Written Legacy

Many of Valletta's collections still present serious and urgent issues of preservation and this should be a major target area. The high costs of professional restoration, coupled with the sheer volume of the manuscript and printed matter which requires attention in the different Valletta collections necessitates a priority exercise. A well-planned and executed programme attracting local but also foreign sponsorships and grants would, at least in part, alleviate the present situation, enabling the restoration of the most urgent cases. Such material may then be promoted for sponsorship on the basis of its current significance. Thus, documentation pertaining to the Great Siege of 1565 and to the subsequent founding of Valletta itself may be given priority in the context of their respective 450th anniversaries. Manuscript and printed matter about particular countries, or written in specific languages may be brought to the attention of national or private agencies of that country. Good selection of the written artefact and the rewarding of the sponsoring individuals or agencies through public recognition is generally the recipe for success, as has been demonstrated by examples from Europe.⁵ Some local initiatives in this direction have been taken but these require constant support which is usually better achieved when the institution has managed to create well-organised voluntary organisations.⁶

The promotion of public engagement in the form of well-run voluntary associations of 'Friends' sustained by the parent institution may contribute considerably to a reduction in collection damage and hence in less need of costly and time-consuming restoration interventions in the future. In the Maltese context regular book cleaning done by committed and supervised non-professionals after following a basic course on the subject could also be promoted. Beyond simply cleaning volumes, participants would also note the condition of the volume and any cases requiring immediate intervention. Valletta 2018 resources could be used to promote such a scheme with University of Malta students as an option for a paid summer job with government.

The essentially European nature of the National Library's collections lends itself particularly well in this regard. Rare printed first editions, as well as volumes from the Archive of the Order of St John concerning the Order's members or its property held in Europe would fit admirably in this context. Valletta 2018 should be utilised as a platform for the launching and dissemination of this initiative. While much has been done to showcase the city's artistic heritage, more long-term benefits can be obtained through the promotion of the European written heritage curated by Valletta's institutions while highlighting its dire need of restoration. This requires the elaboration of well-planned schemes.

Improving Physical Access

Issues of lack of space and – equally serious – lack of physical access still characterise most of Valletta's public written memory institutions. This is glaringly the case with the National Library which remains inaccessible to users with mobility limitations. The recent acquisition by the Maltese government of ground-floor areas within the National Library building should provide a unique opportunity to address both issues. It is indeed a national embarrassment and a disservice to tax-payers that the National Library is still not accessible to all citizens. Infrastructural development aimed at making culture more accessible has been a major target area for ECoC and constitutes one of its desired permanent legacies (Garcia and Cox 2013).

Public Engagement as Legacy Projects

The level of public engagement generated by ECoCs has invariably been considered as one of the major measures of success. In the context of Valletta's memory institutions, so much remains to be done in this regard and 2018 can and should be exploited to kick-start a number of initiatives. These can broadly be divided into three main interlinked categories, namely citizen awareness, citizen participation and citizen contribution. All three, in turn, would contribute towards permanent improvements in terms of preservation, awareness and accessibility of written memory, as well as greater and more relevant integration of such memory into the formal and informal learning related to the Maltese European experience. The tapping of a variety of European funding programmes should be undertaken with greater vigour once some of the potential public engagement projects outlined below are taken up.

Attempts at making citizens more appreciative and interested in Valletta's written heritage have been carried out, mostly in the form of brief clips shown on Maltese State television and shared on social media channels. Longer TV programmes are currently being produced, with the aim of providing more comprehensive coverage of different repositories. A main activity for Valletta 2018 should be the extended opening of such repositories, with interactive exhibitions focusing on areas which attract public interest. Episodes from daily life experiences, corsairing, the visual aspect of past political propaganda and the evolution of Valletta's mapping are some examples for which abundant original material is housed in Valletta. Learning materials created for such exhibitions would have more permanent relevance if they are designed in such a way as to make their integration in school curricula possible. The publication of simplified versions of original written and visual documents relating to a specific landmark, subject or personality may also be undertaken. One of the great local lacunae in this regard is the use of cartoons, graphic books and comic strips. This proved to be one of the most effective ways of communicating the past with the young and not so young who are increasingly impatient with the more traditional learning strategies (Witek 1989).

In the context of Valletta 2018, the indexing of even a select number of Maltese newspapers covering a given time period may be undertaken where Valletta itself is concerned. This would result in a wealth of currently untapped data pertaining, for instance, to the whole spectrum of life in the city. Advertisements of Valletta businesses, for example, has a particular appeal to the non-specialist. Such data may moreover be used to populate the GIS *Culturemapmalta* project mentioned below.

The planning and construction of Valletta itself from 1566 to the early 1600s is extensively documented in both written and visual formats, the latter in the form of plans of proposed city

layouts and of early depictions of buildings and areas in the city. Much of these primary sources have already featured in published academic studies. The setting up of a permanent interactive experience of the first decades of Valletta would include comparisons of original buildings and spaces with their transformations over time. This could also take the form of an interactive website with a GIS map of Valletta, which would be updated with on-going research about such aspects as city crime, riots, mortality statistics, the evolving commercial activity and routes of secular and religious celebrations, among other.⁷ The website would also encourage user input, which should prove mutually enriching.

The latter initiative is an example of how citizens may participate in the process of making Valletta's written memory institutions more relevant and accessible. The concept of citizen science, while not new *per se*, is currently being increasingly applied to the humanities. Through citizen science projects, members of the general public who are willing to contribute some of their time to community or personal research, are assigned specific tasks requiring a degree of intellectual or broadly scientific input, in such a way that both the institution and the citizen end up being both contributors as well as recipients (Dobrevna and Azzopardi 2014).

A different but crucial means of public engagement is that of direct contribution of written memory material that is currently lacking from national collections. Rather than participation through such well-organised initiatives as discussed above, in this scenario, citizens would be encouraged to share any material they themselves may possess. Maltese public written memory institutions suffer from some considerable gaps in their collections. In the case of the National Library of Malta the relatively recent legal deposit enactments, as referred to above, attempt to address this. The very large amount of Melitensia published abroad over the centuries and which consequently has never fallen under any Maltese legal deposit obligations similarly needs to be seriously addressed. Other research-relevant material which should be part of the collection is also at times either misplaced or else never entered the collection in the first place. Among the latter one finds the posters of Maltese newspapers. While copies of all Maltese newspapers published on the island do find themselves in the national collection, the newspaper poster itself does not, although traditionally it has constituted a major source of the daily headlines for individuals who do not seek access to the newspaper in its print or digital format. Another glaring gap in the national printed collection is that pertaining to almanacs and other forms of ephemera, including political propaganda print. While such articles were generally not considered worth including in the past they are now recognised as indispensable for most areas of social history and indeed any past activities in which the mass of the population was a protagonist.

In this context, an alternative programme to the outright donation of material would be devised to encourage Melitensia collectors to allow the National Library to digitise copies of such missing non-copyrighted material from their private collections. As in the case of programmes aimed at preservation, the crucial contribution of private collectors and possibly also of institutions would be publicly acknowledged – not least on the digitised item itself. These items would be catalogued and rendered accessible to researchers using the public collection. As is the case with similar initiatives elsewhere, policies need to be put in place whereby the donor would choose whether or not to allow the library to accept requests for the provision of copies of the material to users. Much ephemera of significant research value missing from the national collection is to be found in local and foreign institutions, often

without the latter even realising its importance and the fact that it might well constitute the only known copy. In the case of private collectors, the situation is more worrying in that with the passing away of its owner, such material often ends up dispersed between family members and all trace of it is lost.

A way to kick-start this initiative may take the form of appealing for digital copying of Valletta views, plans, maps and photographs in private ownership. This, coupled with material already in public collections, would then be utilised to create a visual database of Valletta images from the past. The visual nature of the project would appeal to both the general public as well as to the researcher. In the latter case, it is often difficult to confirm how individual buildings, streets and other areas looked like at any given point in time. Structural changes would of course be easier to note and to date. This material would prove particularly useful in the context of the increasing amount of public and private building restoration projects carried out in the Capital.

'DigiRoots': A Proposal for a Public Registry Project

The Public Registry archive constitutes another major public archive in Valletta outside the National Library and Notarial collections. Ordinance II of 1862 provided for the formation and registration of certain civil acts, namely births, marriages and deaths and these started to be kept as from the following year. In contrast with the Notarial archive, it did not sustain damage caused by either war or neglect and the collection is pretty much complete and well-preserved. The fond is, however, not open to the general public and this is proving to be a considerable handicap for citizen research into genealogical history. What may well be the archive holding the greatest appeal to the general public is thus the one least accessible. The closest the archive has come towards interacting with the public has consisted of a series of exhibitions featuring prominent Maltese personalities whose records in the Public Registry were exhibited, alongside with other personal effects loaned by their descendants. These exhibitions proved extremely popular with the general public.⁸

Public domain and free searchable digitisation of large collections of family and genealogical-related data have been carried out in a number of EU states as well as others and these are enabling citizens to trace their family history and that of individual family members to an extent hardly possible before. This is already having a bearing on Maltese family history, with records of Maltese serving in the British armed forces rendered available through a variety of online genealogical websites. The digitisation of national archives' family and personal history holdings, primarily those of the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and New Zealand have revealed the extent of Malta-related family and service records in existence. Such records have now been uploaded and are generally freely available in the respective national archives' websites.⁹ Apart from military records, these national archive portals contain a wealth of information concerning Maltese migrants.

In recent years commercial websites and companies based largely, if not wholly, online have also realised the value and appeal of such genealogical records. They have started publishing previously undigitised information gathered from a variety of public and at times private sources, which would otherwise not have been digitized due to financial constraints. In these cases, searches can be carried out on a monthly or yearly subscription basis or else a charge per individual document ('pay-per-view'). Military and immigration records, as well as censuses, records of birth, marriage and death records, passport applications and photographs

are more or less regularly added. Thus any member of the general public interested in creating their family tree can undertake such a venture with far more ease than previously possible, although it should be noted that records available on one website may not be available on another, which may necessitate multiple subscriptions.

A project along the lines of *ancestry.co.uk* may be initiated utilising the records of the Malta Public Registry. The potential for turning this closed archive into a vibrant one, with online search facilities, exhibitions and the provision of professional family research services is indeed great. Collaboration with professional Maltese genealogists together with sponsorships from private institutions may provide the required financial requisites for such a transformation. Even if a payment system is adopted, the initiative is likely to prove popular, adding a further opportunity for citizen engagement with written memory. The potential of eventually adding family-related sources from surviving Malta censuses, passport applications and local emigration records would further enhance the project. The possible eventual inclusion of the unique parochial records would result in a Maltese ‘DigiRoots’ with data going back to the second half of the 16th century.¹⁰

Integrating written Heritage within the National Educational Experience

While improved awareness, accessibility and services are gradually reaching the adult audience, much more remains to be done where the younger school-age population is concerned. National minimum curricula have followed each other in succession, at times referring to the need to integrate cultural awareness within the formal educational experience. In reality, however, schools remain for the most part detached and disconnected from real work experiences as well as from national cultural experiences. In the limited timetable slots left available, humanistic and cultural education remains for the most part theoretical, class-based and a victim of examinations in which the rote learning of staple ‘facts’ is examined.

Given its unique written heritage resources, Valletta would make an admirable starting point in this respect. The creation of pedagogically-sound and motivating educational experiences within Valletta’s public libraries and archives is as required as it is overdue.

Concluding Remarks

Valletta’s rich written memory institutions provide some serious challenges but also exciting opportunities for their conservation and – equally crucial – for their fuller integration as a dynamic resource within a Maltese and international cultural framework. Financial considerations as well as wavering political, national and administrative commitment have hindered the development of much wider accessibility to such cultural wealth. Increasing public awareness is however permeating through such barriers. Citizen commitment (as in the case of the Notarial Archives project,) coupled with increased state commitment (as evidenced by the acquisition of significant private collections) constitute encouraging signs. Sustaining these and similar actions, together with a well-planned strategy for making Valletta’s written heritage both secure and publicly accessible offer the only guarantees not only for the material’s physical survival but above all for an enriched cultural experience which is shared across the ever-increasing diversity that is Malta and the European reality.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the evolving role of the other main type of memory institutions, namely museums, see Carmel Borg and Peter Mayo, *infra*.
2. This paper discusses only written records. Of course, for a considerable number of cultures and across different time periods, the primary form of record was not written.
3. On these digitised collections: <http://www.hmml.org/malta-study-center.html>.
4. https://nso.gov.mt/en/nso/Historical_Statistics/Malta_Blue_Books/Pages/Malta-Blue-Books.aspx. At the time of writing the Blue Books are not available digitally on the NSO portal due to a temporary web space issue.
5. Thus, for instance, the 'Sponsor a Book' and 'Back a Book' and 'BeFriend a Book' initiatives launched by UK libraries such as Christ's College, Cambridge, Lambeth Palace and Senate House Libraries, UK.
6. A working example from Valletta at the time of writing is the 'Adopt a Notary' scheme run by the Notarial Archives Resources Council.
7. See for example *Locating London's Past*: the interactive website and GIS map created for London: <http://www.locatinglondon.org/>.
8. A total of 25 exhibitions were held, each of which attracted hundreds of visitors.
9. United Kingdom National Archives: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>; Australia National Archives: <http://www.naa.gov.au/>; Canada National Archives: <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Pages/home.aspx>; New Zealand national Archives: <http://archives.govt.nz/>.
10. The Maltese Church has started its own project, consisting of the digital uploading of its parish and other records in the public domain. The website however needs adequate searchable tools: <http://archives.maltadiocese.org/>.

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