
EVERY DAY LIFE IN 'BRITISH' MALTA

Henry Frendo*

Is the British connection in Malta becoming increasingly distant and dated? Was our 'Englishness' never much more than a varnish?

I was recently sitting at a water-front restaurant table by the Msida Yacht Marina with an old time friend who had repatriated after twenty years in England. The warm breeze, the shimmering sea, the leisurely pace, all somehow evoked a colonial atmosphere, or at least an inkling of it: the sort of 'times past' feeling still transmitted by hotels like Victoria Falls on the Zimbabwe-Zambia border or at the Raffles in Singapore, or indeed by the new golf club gazebo at the Marsa. We had both been overseas, he longer than I; but we had gravitated back to a common point of origin: what a flimsy school text-book in the 1950s used to call 'Malta, Our Island Home'. 'So how do you spend your time here?' he asked, as the wine was being served. 'What do you do usually?'

Good Lord! How did you live? What did you do? How were you organising your time? My diary was on the table. 'How do you like the fish?' I replied: 'I think it's fresh'.

Turn these questions in your head, and try to begin consciously and comprehensively to describe your 'every day life', wherever and whatever that may be. It is a very tall order, even if you had to do it now and for yourself alone, let alone doing that for different times of days of the week, of months, years, decades, generations, for a whole community or society.

In the *Din l-Art Helwa* lecture series on "Everyday Life", held in Valletta in 1993, the former Attorney General Dr Carmelo Testa spent well over an hour talking about Malta during the French occupation, which lasted two years. The British occupation until the Second World War lasted exactly 70 times longer: longer still if we were to take it to its historic conclusion in 1964.

Historical 'duration' during that time was not always as intense as this undoubtedly was during the Maltese insurrection of 2 September 1798 and the subsequent blockade of the trapped French troops. But there were many, many such periods of intensity

* Henry Frendo, a doctoral graduate of Oxford University, is Professor of History at the University of Malta and a life member of Clare Hall, Cambridge.

during the British period, right from the very start, when it seemed momentarily uncertain if the Order might not return: innovations and despotisms, plagues and epidemics, prosperity and depression, improvements, disagreements, organisations, defence and security concerns and plans, wars: a myriad changes - even in the very languages spoken and written in the Maltese Islands.

Everyday life is neither static, nor uniform, nor always discernible to the historian, or to anyone. A specialized fleeting time-frame focus on it would probably belong more closely in the realm of sociology or anthropology. People do some things which they want others to know about, but other things they prefer to keep to themselves; and even the same people do different things at different times.

Some aspects of everyday life were longer-lasting than others. In 1838 and in 1842 we find English observers intrigued by the country habit of putting on shoes when entering Valletta and then removing them on leaving. They recounted the story of a country woman going to Valletta with a companion: 'How long have you been using your pair of shoes?' she asked. 'I have worn them', came the reply, 'since the time of the plague' (in 1813). 'Oh!', the other rejoined, 'mine are much older, I have had them since the blockade of the French'.¹

Other aspects recur. Take family connections and traditions in Maltese politics and journalism. Between the wars Enrico Mizzi half-replaced his father Fortunato, a magistrate's son who died in 1905, as leader of the Nationalist Party, and his elder brother Giuseppe as editor of the *Malta* newspaper. All lawyers. The first president of the Malta Labour Party in the 1920s, Colonel William Savona, also a lawyer, was the son of Sigismund Savona, founder of the pro-British Reform Party and a former army schoolmaster, who died in 1908. Thus if Ceylon had an 'Uncle-Nephew Party' as the United National Party was called by its opponents, Malta had genuine Father-Son parties. But Malta too had an Uncle-Nephew Party, if we regard Colonel Roger Strickland (who died in 1975 aged 70) as a constitutional Party 'carry-on' from his uncle, Lord Strickland, who died 35 years earlier. And then there was Mable. So in Malta we could even boast of a Father-Daughter Party. That beats Ceylon hands down.²

But there was always some mobility and variety in Maltese society. Not much, but over a long period it is remarkable. It could probably be characterised by three or four general features.

1. C.Cassar, 'Everyday Life in Malta in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', in *The British Colonial Experience 1800 - 1964. The impact on Maltese Society*, ed. V. Mallia-Milanes (Malta, 1988), p.104.

2. See H.Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony. The Maltese Experience* (Malta, 1979, 2nd ed. 1991), p. 186, p. 198.

The maritime and military connection was reinforced and had widespread repercussions on the labour force as well as on perceptions, attitudes, methods, techniques. Because Britain was the world's leading industrialized nation, this had an important technological and tradesman edge to it, as could be seen in the building of dry and hydraulic docks and in the influential Dockyard School.

As the world's leading overseas empire, Britain also had considerable control of the trade-routes, for which the Mediterranean was a vital water-way, especially after the Suez Canal opened in 1869. That considerably influenced commerce, especially entrêpot trade; it again reinforced the role of shipping and, with it, of subsidiary services, such as insurance and banking. Jobs in the harbour and the adjoining towns and suburbs were different jobs, but there were, on the whole, more of them; and more of them were relatively better-paid too.

This shifted the population, and transformed Malta's productive base. The cotton and tobacco industries, for example, died out, whereas ship-repairing and ship-chandelling prospered. The civil service and the judiciary were among the institutions that were better established and pruned by the British; although a civil servant was likely to be under-paid compared to a dockyard worker, especially a skilled one. Dockyard workers were better off, too, than workers in the private enterprise sector, and may generally be said to have earned more money and to have been better off than practically all other workers in Malta: a contrived and cushioned 'proletarian aristocracy', especially in war-time.

The physical landscape too began to change, not only by the birth of Sliema from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, but more importantly perhaps by the growth of suburbia in such areas as Floriana, Hamrun and Paola, partly as a result of the move away from country to town. This urbanisation then was another gradual shift, comparable to that from sail to steam. But these metamorphoses characterised the period and led in turn to many other changes in lifestyle. One obvious consequence was density of population in concentrated areas, which only slowly acquired basic services, such as water supply and drainage systems.

There was an in-built insecurity however in Malta's dependence on military spending because you could not have an economy geared to changing waves of 'redeployment', 'retrenchment', 'rearmament', 'disengagement', decided in a faraway metropolis in the prevalent foreign policy mood or economic interest of the so called 'mother-country'. That was hardly a sound basis for economic planning or development. Or for a sense of national direction of self-fulfilment. Violent clashes occurred almost every time that such precious-and-dispensable jobs were threatened at a time of political unrest, as in 1919, and again later, in 1946, in 1958.

One writer has suggested that large scale Maltese prostitution in Valletta and in London was partly a response to powerlessness. A little bit like grumbling - the proverbial 'Maltese gemgem' - or frugality, in the sense of saving for a rainy day *taht il-maduma*. And as for the cultivation of clientelism, Edward Zammit rightly noted that 'in the colonial context Malta itself was in the situation of a 'client-state'.³ If a state it was.

These are at best insightful outlines of social history, hardly a history of everyday life. The only way in which that other somewhat personalised dimension of everyday life might be captured, would be to try and conjure a rapidly-moving set of images. Without an historical imagination it is impossible meaningfully and intelligibly to recreate a readable past. Hitting the canvas with bold strokes of the brush could at least render an impressionist painting. Lasting history is not unlike a soul-searching painting. But for most of us the transporting, penetrating depiction of mental frames is probably a craft more akin to the *litterateur*. D.H. Lawrence, for instance.

Sitting in a Valletta café in 1920, he captured this spirit:

'A military band went by playing splendidly in the bright, hot morning. The Maltese lounged about, and watched. Splendid the band, and the soldiers! One felt the splendour of the British Empire, let the world say what it likes.'

Indeed the love of spectacle characterising the Maltese lifestyle must have found a natural, joyful, expression in the whole pageantry of empire - the trooping of the colour, the drills and gun salutes, the dazzling parades and marches with hundreds of soldiers, sailors, cavalymen, in their multi-coloured uniforms, which blended so well with - and probably influenced - the boisterous atmosphere of the *festa* with its petards, fireworks, decorations, processions, band marches, nougat, cheesecakes, ribaldry all over the parish.⁴ One aspect of Maltese life that did not impress our gracious imperialist visitor was the supposed knowledge of his language by the natives. 'And they really don't understand English', he wrote to Catherine Carswell in May of the same year, underlining 'don't'.⁵

From the outdoor manifestation - and life in the open air was, as it still is, 'essential and central to the Maltese - let us try to separate the curtains , to peep and eavesdrop

3. E. L. Zammit, 'Aspects of British Colonial Policies and Maltese Patterns of Behaviour', in The British Colonial Experience, ed.V. Mallia - Milanese (Malta, 1988) pp.175-176.

4. H.Frendo, Party Politics, pp.124, 130, 200. See Malta: Culture and Identity, eds. H. Frendo and O. Friggieri (Malta,1995), passim.

5. Party Politics, p.200.

inside some households.

A persian window on life inside the Maltese home was kindly provided to us by the Marquis Alfredo Mattei through this poignant description of everyday village life and the prevailing conditions, while addressing the Council of Government. As a rule, he said,

the men in the casals get up at four in the morning, go to hear the mass of the Parroco and after that they go to Valletta or anywhere else where their work may happen to call them and spend the whole day labouriously at work. Then at the Ave Maria, at 6.00 p.m., the poor labourer rejoins his family, says his prayers, his Rosario, and goes to bed... even at Citta' Vecchia where you had a few learned gentlemen and a few Canonici and Abatini, even they get up very early and the few who study and keep late hours prefer candles to olive oil; to save their eyes, they don't even use petroleum.⁶

What you did depended very much on your class and station. That determined how and where you lived, how you dressed, what you ate and drank, what entertained and what worried you, where and by what means you travelled. If you played polo or football, or perhaps tennis. If you were a soldier or an officer of the regiment. There was overlapping; there were values held in common; but the differences continued to be striking until the post-war world dawned and today's welfare and consumer society gradually came about. Notwithstanding a strong and steady emigration first to Northern Africa and subsequently to the English-speaking world, in spite of droughts and cholera epidemics, during the British period Malta's population trebled. From around 100,000 it went up to around 300,000.

Until the first half of the nineteenth century, nearly one half of the population still lived in and around Valletta. There was then not only the class distinction but also that between urban and rural folk. The normal diet of an employed male labourer consisted of barley bread, some vegetables, a little cheese, a few olives or some oil, pasta, occasionally fish or fruit. Women and children ate less but shared very much the same menu. The family dressed themselves in cheap, coarse local cottons - the men in trousers, shirt, coat and cap; the women in petticoat, chemise and faldetta. Shoes, as already noted, were uncommon. The complete family shared one or two rooms, sleeping frequently on straw. In rural areas collecting manure for the farmer often served in lieu of rent; in the cities this was paid in money. To live, a family needed at least one shilling (five cents today!), most of it for food. Bread, the most

6. Ibid., pp.3,12.

conspicuous budget item, cost one penny a pound or a little more, and the average person would have consumed between one or two lbs. of it daily. Families tended to be large. Any surplus earnings were spent on wine, coffee, tobacco, spirits, a little extra oil, and contributions to the parish church.⁷

There were a few hundred landlords, the smaller of whom received no more 'than what was necessary for their decent support'. By this time, forty years into the British occupation,

wealthier natives had adopted a French or Italian type diet, distinguished from that of their countrymen by wheaten bread, macaroni, meat and better wine. They wore finer clothing and enjoyed more housing space. Education cost them little, elementary schools were generally free, the Lyceum charged only 2 shillings and the University 30/- per annum...

The standard of the 'principal Maltese landowner, advocate, physician or merchant' was reckoned to cost some £400 annually, but important families lived reasonably on much less. Junior clerks earned £20, the lowest paid magistrates £120, the lowest paid physician £60, which was what a good artisan would earn. Merchants of all kinds - including shopkeepers, dairymen, bakers - numbered about 5000 in 1942. The wealthiest families, two or three score, were businessmen.⁸ The Governor's salary, at £5,000, was difficult to beat.

There was mass illiteracy. *Skejjel tan-Nuna* taught village children folktales, nursery rhymes and religious *kantalieni*. A Department of Primary Schools was formed in 1840; but in 1861, out of a population of 134,055, less than 8,000 males could write Italian while less than 4,000 could write English. In 1900 the University of Malta had 86 students, all males. In 1891, 80 per cent of males and 85 per cent of females in the 45 - 50 age group could not read. Of the 14 'newspapers' issued in 1889, 3 were in English, 6 in Italian and 5 in Maltese. 'If the earnings of the breadwinner were not enough to support the family, could the parents be blamed for sending their children to work rather than to school?'

In 1861 the largest single occupation was that of labourers in the field, of whom there

7. See C. A. Price, *Malta and the Maltese. A Study in nineteenth century migration* (Melbourne, 1954), p. 9.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 13 - 14.

9. H. Frenco, *Birth Pangs of a Nation. Manwel Dimech's Malta, 1860 - 1921* (Malta, 1972), pp. 27 - 30.

were 8,706. In the same year we find 850 shepherds and goatherds, 463 farmer-proprietors, 1,375 farmer-tenants and 203 gardeners. Moreover a large number of those employed in commercial activity, such as petty vendors, depended upon the farming industry for their products and wares. At this time there were still 4,018 cotton weavers (*nissiega tal-qoton*), who complemented the spinners (*barriema tal-qoton*), but between 1851 and 1891 cotton spinning as an occupation, often a female one, decreased by 74.4%.

While in 1861, 4,172 of the upper classes did not work (*benestanti*) and 30,000 of the lower classes had no fixed occupation, in 1891 we find apparently 10,000 less unemployed (20,000) and more people - nearly 9,000 including 22 females - engaged in conveyance and storage. More were starting to work in commercial or industrial jobs rather than in agricultural ones. The industrial revolution was slowly coming to Malta, via the British connection. Services flourished. If you count up domestic servants - usually young women from the villages - to washer women, those engaged in ironing clothes, cooks, grooms, nurses, coachmen and calessers, the third largest occupation could be said to have been that of servitude of the poorer classes to the remaining 1,144 *benestanti*, the higher and middle classes, and, increasingly, in the homes of British officers and their families. Both Ryan in 1910 and Wignacourt in 1914 noted that English housewives found Maltese servants honest, humble, hardworking and very cheap; in fact, they said, the Maltese made the best servants in the world.¹⁰ In 1921 the average wages, including board, for domestic service were one shilling per day (5 cents, again) or £18 a year. Agricultural labour earned three shillings daily or £54 a year, while occupations in trade and commerce made 5 shillings daily or £90 a year. Unemployment in that year, after the Great War, was mostly in the industrial field (10.7% of the total), especially unskilled labour, in the building industry and metal works; the second highest percentage (6.8%) was in domestic service.¹¹

A profile of everyday life in the second half of the nineteenth century, which was not so drastically altered by the Great War, could be sketched as follows. For a person to be educated and for him to know Italian was one and the same thing: for countless generations Italian had been the language of town and gown, of court and cloister. There was a numerous middle class. In the 1870s the 141,775 inhabitants were mostly artificers and labourers employed in agriculture, but nearly 10,000 were engaged in commerce. 2,290 belonged to the professions, and 1,210 to the clergy. Of the 2,133 listed as nobles and landowners, those *titolati* entitled to precedence as nobles were few. In 1877 the 'working' or 'poorer' classes were estimated at 112,360, about three-fourths of the population, the remaining one-fourth (39,910) being the 'non-manual' classes.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 42 - 45.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 46 - 48.

The parochial structure was intact: religion was at the heart of Maltese life just as the church was at the centre of the village, and formed part of the strong social nexus by means of which the common people looked up deferentially to the 'respectable' members of the community. The parish priest was at hand with his advice not just in his capacity as clergyman but also on a personal level. Similarly, the notary, lawyer, architect or doctor was close by - you went to his office, he came to your house - and such people would be president of the local band club or secretary of the religious confraternity. Practically everybody went to church - people therefore met or at least saw each other on feast days if not daily... Peasants were never far off from the village square.

The church bell formed part of their lives. Farmers, petty vendors, middlemen (*pitkali*) travelled by horse-cart from the countryside to the city to sell their produce. The employees at the dockyard were mostly recruited from the surrounding cities. Before the railway was launched in 1883, a journey by horse carriage from the former capital Notabile into Valletta took not more than three hours.¹²

Between the Napoleonic era and the Second World War, inland transport, a vital means of communication, we would move from the horse, donkey and mule carts to the railway, then the tram, the omnibus, the *karozzin*, the *char-a-banc*. One could similarly sketch progressions in so many other areas: health, hygiene and hospitals; academic, technical and vocational education; guest houses and hotels, with special emphasis in that case on the Pheonicia, Malta's first spacious and modern tourist establishment of class started just before the Second World War.

Between the wars, changes continued but the continuities were telling, especially in the spheres of social classes or categories, and in ongoing culture clash. Trade unions emerged. And the motor car, and wireless. In other spheres there were increased tensions, but not altogether new ones, as in clericalism and anticlericalism. The role of the church, of religion and the clergy - urban and rural - in Maltese social life, cannot be under-estimated. If we take the figures of secular and regular clergy, including members of the various orders represented in Malta, at about the turn of the century, these would give us roughly one cleric to every 133 persons (1,237 out of a total population of 165,037).¹³ The twenties were relatively quiet on the social front,

12. See H.Frendo, *Party Politics*, pp. 2-3.

13. Ibid. See also *Birth Pangs of a Nation*, pp. 39 - 41.

although under self-government some initiatives were taken to extend elementary schools and start workers' housing; but various other social measures, such as workmen's compensation, had to wait until the Compact took office in 1927. In the years that followed much energy was squandered on politico-religious issues with the consequences of constitutional crises. After the Abyssinian War, and with Hitler in power in Germany, Britain began to rearm, which in a narrow Maltese context revitalised sagging employment. But once again we have the cycle of dependent employment and fluctuating economy. At the turn of the century the breakwater project had caused full employment, with labourers imported from Sicily and Spain, but its completion led to a slump and a depression; the same symptom had characterised the Crimean War in mid-century and the Great War itself, leading to the Sette Giugno. Rearmament and the renewed strategic importance of Malta meant more defence spending on ensuring adequate services and standards, mainly for the troops, but inevitably there were spin-offs, including infrastructural ones, from which the local population also benefitted, such as some well-constructed roads.

By 1939, when war was declared, more Maltese spoke better English and used English products but, actually, Malta never moved from her Mediterranean anchorage. A lot of the presumed Englishness was a varnish which could not resist the test of time. In addition to some noticeable modifications, accents and stresses - be it the predilection for fish and chips, whisky or tea, and probably some more discipline which allegedly also kept the Mafia away, Maltese everyday life, habits and practices remained essentially rooted in a Latin South. Even if propped up by the survival of British parliamentary institutions and traditions, aspirations towards a new Europe firmly accompanied and firmly replaced those for the old Empire.

Englishness was, with some exceptions, not unlike a lump of sugar in a pot of tea. A pertinent situation analogy in this respect relates to one Maurice Carvillo, a Gibraltarian, in the memories of a John Stewart, who was visiting the Rock in the 1960s with his wife Joan. I like it because it is hilarious but also because I believe it conveys a fundamental, perhaps unpalatable message to a colonial society.

- Mr Stewart, no? I turned to find a small dark man with a fine face, watchful eyes, and a free-smiling mouth now stiffened into formality.

'Yes, I am Stewart'.

- 'Ah, welcome!' A soft handclasp and a strong smile. 'My name is Carvillo - Maurice Robertson Carvillo. I was sent to meet you. I hope you have had a very jolly good trip, eh?' The English was what we used to call 'babu', as used by the book-educated Hindus. It is 'anglo-

English', more English than the English themselves, and it is characterized by hard-won but stranded slang. The enunciation was clear and strong, however, and the accent was what the English called cultured.

- 'Fine, thank you', I said. 'Very kind of you to meet us'. He was a very kind man, I could see, if a little unsure and injured, as is the heritage and condition of all colonial peoples. He was full of generous curiosity and glad to be the first Gibraltarian to set eyes on us. He was anxious to assess us and, if possible, give a good report of us to his colleagues in the civil service, which we were to join.

- 'Don't mention it!' he was saying now. 'A privilege!' Straight from the Spanish, I was thinking, intonation and all. 'Ni hablar... un privilegio'.

- 'Welcome to our old Rock', said Maurice Carvillo, adding defensively, 'Such as it is'.

- 'It looks magnificent to us', we said together with fervour.

- 'Oh, it's just a small place, and we are a small people. But we are loyal, very British. You will see. The Government has allocated to you a large quarter, quite high up in the mountain. It has a stupendous view. We hope you will like it... These bally porters!' Cavillo exclaimed suddenly. Now, before our eyes, he turned on the porters and transformed himself. The neat, polite and precise 'Englishman' vanished; in his place a shrill and voluble Spaniard sprang to life. Streams of sound spirited from him, with sudden punctuations on high inflections and cruciform castings of the arms. His hands, eyes and teeth flashed in the lamplight. The porters turned truculently towards him, but he beat them down with words, with ardent protests and magniloquent appeals to manhood, justice and courtesy. They turned back to our cases, defending themselves as they worked with long rattles of words. When the baggage was loaded Carvillo turned back to me and winked.

- 'Good show, sir, what?'

- 'Jolly good show', I said, using the expression for the first time in my life.¹⁴

14. J. D. Stewart: *Gibraltar the keystone* (London, 1967), pp. 5-6

In Malta, as in Gibraltar, and also in Cyprus, the British Empire had to put up with Southerners who were *Europeans*. Obsequious and tangential these may have been, depending on circumstances, but nonplussed by awe or fully assimilated they could not quite have become. The European Mediterranean rarely features culturally in British imperial historiography, which prefers to emphasize military, commercial and strategic considerations linked almost exclusively to 'Africa' or 'Asia'. From our point of view there can be little doubt that the seemingly endemic 'language question' of Malta and the gradual replacement of Italian by English for 'non-native' in-group communication, was arguably the single most lasting legacy of the British connection, albeit a more deeply problematic one than is generally acknowledged. In employment history, the most significant changes took place in the dockyard and the civil service. In politics, a parliamentary tradition slowly and haltingly evolved. In religion, the church acted as a bulwark, which the Empire respected to advantage. Industrialization increased in the 1950s but only took off after independence. Generally speaking, the changes in everyday life became more marked after 1945 than these had become after 1918, the Second World War being for various reasons a greater catalyst of change in Malta than the First World War had been.¹⁵

15. See H. Frendo, 'The Second World War : A short introduction, in L. Ritchie, *The Epic Of Malta* (Malta, 1940; first printed in London c.1943).